

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Mapping Poetics, Documenting Ideology, and Above All, Being Motivated by Love

A true artist sees in a stone the incipient shape trapped inside, and thus does not force the material, but rather sets the concealed shape free.

—Amos Oz, *Elsewhere, Perhaps*

Amos Oz once wrote:

Reading two or three paragraphs will suffice to convince the reader that the author is not a thinker possessing a systematic theory, but rather an easily excitable person, who tends to react emotionally to various subjects; one of those ardent fellows who, when they don't contradict themselves, then they repeat themselves, and when they neither repeat nor contradict themselves—then they trip over their own line of thinking, and approach untheoretically topics that perhaps require a definite theoretical approach.

Introduction to *Under This Blazing Light*

Anyone reading Amos Oz's polemical and some what philosophical essays, in particular, his political, social texts, will easily observe that this is not emotional, sentimental writing, not a sweeping, gushing reaction to events that require restraint, filtering, and sorting out. Amos Oz's polemical theoretical writing is not an outpouring of emotion calling for control and restraint. Quite the reverse. Oz's polemical theoretical writing, dealing mostly with political and social issues, gives a distinct impression of very controlled, disciplined, succinct thinking, of highly methodical observations of reality, its processes, patterns, and manifestations. In sum, his writing shows a crystalline logic, sharply honed, polished, and precise.

Amos Oz approaches the reality under examination like a careful scientist in a laboratory, one eye closed and the other screwed to a sterile micro-

scope, a sharp scalpel in hand. With great concentration and lucidity, he cuts, dissects, separates, sifts, delimits, and defines. He is always disciplined, meticulous, unerring. With economical, sure, and fluent motions of his pen, he formulates decisive, well-founded observations and draws clear, accurate, and perfectly logical conclusions.

And yet, there is not a single short story, novella, or novel by Amos Oz in which the loud, plaintive, scorching shrieks of naked desire and consuming eroticism do not erupt from the lower depths, making themselves heard and reverberating. Those desires that fill Amos Oz's literary work, those currents of libido and eroticism that course through his writings, are always somber, sinister, untamed, and defiant of the dictates of reason and restraint. This dark aspect manifests itself only within the confines of Oz's aesthetic, poetic territory, never beyond them, never in his polemical theoretical essays. Even in the literary texts, where the insistent erotic cries of desire emanate *de profundis*, there is an attempt, albeit skeptical and hesitant, to contain and restrain the gushing overwhelming sentiment, to throttle the shout and trap it inside the gaping throat.

Here we touch on the most profound, most fundamental poetic nerve of Amos Oz's fiction; the most pervasive and permanent element that recurs again and again in his writing is a state of rivalry and animosity, struggle and strife between two extremes that are irreconcilably hostile and antagonistic to each other. On the one hand, Oz's world is one founded on logic, discipline, pure reason and solid, cogent rationality; on the other hand, it is a dark, demonic world of unbridled desire, echoing with the hoarse shrill shrieks of passion and lust. The turbulent, murky world of gushing, untamed emotions threatens to invade the sober, well-lighted world of rationality and spread its deadly venom there. It seeks to undermine and destroy its order, balance, and serenity; to instill a sinister and evil spirit of malignancy and nightmare that will rob the other domain of its happiness and tranquility. Or, to paraphrase Oz's own terminology, it is a gangster out in a night of long swords, malicious, deadly, infernally clever; a hijacker conspiring to invade the cockpit, take over the helm and steer the craft off its straight and even course and eventually hurl it to perdition.

And yet, the two inveterate antagonists do not always stay barricaded behind their mutual enmity. At times there is a discernable step toward cessation of hostility and detente. There are subtle, hesitant steps toward moderation and accommodation found at the conclusion of some of Oz's stories and novels; a simultaneous attempt, in both territories, for the warring sides to inch their way toward the middle ground, to steer away from the path of perpetual strife and hatred and to accept the idea of coexistence. The dark,

demonic fire begins to abate, and reconciliation, however fragile and tenuous, is given a chance. True, the power struggle between the two rivals is far from terminated, and probably will never cease, but a soft, placating, almost caressing breeze is suddenly felt on the frantic, sweaty neck.

Moreover, there are exchanges between the two sides: characteristics and properties that traditionally belong in one camp begin to migrate to the opposite side. It is not a sweeping trend, just a minor, marginal phenomenon, a modicum of assimilation. A true, complete reconciliation between the opposing poles will never be achieved, let there be no illusion. Any hope of a future truce is bound to be hollow, but something has changed, a tiny crack in the dike, a chink between stones in the wall.

Perhaps one can see an analogy here to the slow, moderate change that Amos Oz himself has wrought in his public image. He is no longer the “medicine man,” the “Sage of the tribe,” conjurer and exorcist of evil spirits, stirring the boiling cauldron of overflowing emotions. From now on, he redefines his function to become the watchmaker of the tribe. He is the one, cautiously, guardedly, who points out errors, time lags, and minute dislocations of the hands on the dial, and perhaps he dares to suggest ways to rectify, repair, and improve matters because, by now, he knows that one cannot subjugate the evil spirits, silence their howls, nor stifle their raucous, hoarse shrieks. What, then, can one do? At best, one can try, gingerly, tenderly, to minimize the burning, to contain the scorching flame, to tone down the noise, perhaps to quell the fury of the evil spirits. But there is no hope of silencing their malicious howling, their fiendish din. One can only try to appease their hysterical fury or, at least, to seek shelter from their venomous hissing, if only for a fleeting moment.

I shall expound on this in subsequent chapters, since this is the recurrent motif of this book: to describe the conflict between opposing poles in Amos Oz’s fiction, to document the seething animosity that exists between the two antagonistic sides and, from time to time, to trace and map the guarded, tenuous, yet clearly discernible attempts at appeasement, to expose the fundamental positions of the opposing sides, and to map the poetics that impels both the struggle and the conciliation—in other words, to try to trace coordinates of the aesthetic strategy that governs Amos Oz’s fiction.

My analysis of the texture of Oz’s fiction in the subsequent chapters will be done from a formalistic-structuralist perspective, that is, treating the literary text as a cumulative continuum of signs but at the same time as a reservoir, a woven tapestry of simultaneous signs. In other words, perceiving the novel or novella as a two-sided textual structure: synchronic and diachronic. The synchronic side is simultaneous, comprising the spatial aspect

of the text, in which the text is perceived as one unit, as if observed from an Olympian viewpoint, whereas the diachronic side is the dynamic aspect of the text, which serves as a skylight from which to view the cumulative development across the text. The literary analysis employed here attempts to identify and describe the signs and patterns that populate the textual system from both the diachronic-dynamic standpoint, on the one hand, and the synchronic-simultaneous, on the other hand.¹

The following aspects will be examined by the two above-mentioned criteria: thematic materials, linear plots, motifs, structures, patterns, textual sequencing, depiction of characters and their motivation, the mapping of landscapes and their metaphoric and/or metonymic function, rhetorical registers, types of narrators and their points of view, the position of the implied author, and so on, in short, seeing the text as an intricate structure of signs and patterns that come together to form global systems of organization through the continual interaction of its components. This “negotiation” between all of the elements, patterns, and constituent parts of the system has a poetic, aesthetic function as well as conceptual and ideological ones, comprising all of the messages that are formulated in the literary text and corresponding with the reader through the poetic mechanism. Thus the structuralist approach to literary study focuses on the multilayered structure of the text, seeing it, on the one hand, as an integrated unit, and on the other hand, as a dynamic mechanism, perpetually moving, yet ever mindful of the poetic and ideological messages embedded in it. One might describe the structuralist approach to literary analysis as a relentless, exhaustive quest for the aesthetic and conceptual DNA encoded in the literary text and, for the task at hand, the one detectable in the narrative oeuvre of Amos Oz.

Language, doubtlessly, is one of the most salient elements in Amos Oz’s fiction, a dependable, unerring watermark and one of its most attractive attributes. His style, the inner rhythm that manifests itself in syntactical patterns and idiosyncratic phrases, the captivating fluency that is not lost even when Oz imposes on it a “verbal diet,” that is, restrains and streamlines it and lowers its registers—this unique, peculiar Ozian handwriting is always present, detectable, inescapable. How is one to define Oz’s writing style?

The secret of his fascinating, colorful style is in its distinctive scent, in the aromatic bouquet that makes it uniquely and inimitably his. One cannot make a mistake: a single line suffices to recognize Oz’s peerless, enticing style.

It is this unique verbal quality that prompted the subtitle of this chapter, “motivated by love.” My aim is not merely to map Oz’s poetics and document his ideas but to express love. It is not only the linguistic attributes

that evoke this love. Amos Oz's writing contains more than one stratum; the worlds that he creates, evokes, molds, and shapes with so much yearning and longing must have found an echo in me and touched my innermost soul. It is as though a very clear, sharp voice, a hidden, subtle sound, emanates from Amos Oz's writing and finds resonance and response in me. And I do not mean to elaborate on this. Not here nor anywhere else, as Oz himself once remarked. But at the same time, there is something less personal that I have no problem discussing. And again, it is Oz's language, the linguistic aspect. The language of the sage, the witch doctor, the verbal magician, the skillful exorcist, the one sitting at the center of the circle, captivating and fascinating listeners with his silver tongue. As has been noted before, the seductive quality of Oz's language makes his prose practically irresistible.

Hence this joint effort to conduct a dialogue with Amos Oz and to produce a collaborative book. But there is more, much more, to it. It is not only the personal aspect of cooperating with Oz in the same literary forum; there is crucial importance, perhaps a unique one, to the correspondence between the author and the literary critic when it is gathered in one volume. It forms a crossroad for two opposing points of view to meet and complement each other, to negotiate, to exchange views, to shed light on each other, and to expose new angles of observing the texts in focus. In the process of comparison, materials are wrenched from their native context and implanted in a new one, the "host" context. Being compared and contrasted in an unnatural, nonautomatic context, each gains new dimensions and perspectives. In the process, new layers of meaning and interpretation are unearthed.

In an address delivered at a conference on S. Y. Agnon's fiction, Amos Oz spoke of a hidden, clandestine vein that exists in Agnon's fiction, a "vegetative" vein, he called it, dark, savage, untamed, undomesticated, a sinister, nightmarish current that wends its way in tenebrous depths. Perhaps he did not phrase it in these exact terms, but this was what he meant, and he was absolutely right. There is such a primeval, feral, irrational, sometimes demonic strain in Agnon's narratives, but it also is evident that such a sinister, diabolical, nightmarish strain lurks in the deepest regions of Amos Oz's own fiction.

Small wonder, then, that Oz cherishes Agnon's fiction so much and is such an excellent interpreter of his work. For, when Oz reads Agnon, he does not just read Agnon, he revisits his own fiction. But let me hasten to explain that this similarity between Agnon's and Oz's bedrock veins does not in any way diminish the latter's originality. Far from it. The affinity between Agnon and Oz is merely an additional poetic attribute that only enhances Oz's fiction and further elevates it.²

There is a children's Hanukkah song in Hebrew that begins, "We've come to drive away the darkness." But in Agnon's and Oz's fiction, there is no intention to drive away the darkness; quite the reverse; there is a tendency to listen to the darkness, to indulge in it, and to succumb to its savage, sinister, often venomous, ever-fascinating charm.

True, Agnon sometimes pretends to try to drive away the darkness, to defeat it or at least to camouflage it. He goes through the motions of trying to emasculate it, to curb its destructive force, to contain the erupting impulses. Oz, too, pretends to do so, but to a lesser degree. He allows the mass of darkness to float near the surface layer of the text and to peek through the chinks of the seemingly serene reality that it depicts. Agnon, on the other hand, presses down on the dark mass and pushes it back, away from the surface and into the bottom of the text. And he always covers the murky, demonic mass with one mask on top of another of sardonic, derisive, mischievous irony. His technique is reminiscent of Tchernichovsky's *Idylls* in that a tragic core is always found at the bottom of a beguiling, deceptively tranquil reality.³ It is like the fairy-tale pea, lodged underneath a pile of mattresses and downy quilts, whose existence is persistently felt.

Yet in both Agnon's and Oz's fiction, no one attempts to drive away the darkness, no one sings light-drenched optimistic Hanukkah songs. In the deepest regions of Agnon's and Oz's fiction, darkness reigns, savagery rages furiously, and unbridled desires shriek hoarsely like baleful banshees. The demonic vein never ceases to pulsate with violence and hostility.

Amos Oz concluded his lecture on Agnon saying, "Forgive me if I did not tell you anything new. I wasn't invited here to deliver newfangled ideas. I came to tell you about suffering, love, and agony in Agnon, this Ecclesiastes who disguises himself in pretty costumes. I spoke about him the way I did out of love, love alone" ("The Profane Heart and the Way Back," *Under This Blazing Sun*). I, on the other hand, certainly intend to bring you new ideas, and I take the liberty to claim that I have, indeed, presented here a number of new interpretations. But, above all, I too came to tell you about suffering, love, and agony in Amos Oz's stories. I spoke about him the way I did out of love, love alone.

A final prefatory note:

Here and there throughout the book, one may come across some repetitions; comments in one chapter may recur in another. This was done deliberately, to render each chapter a self-contained unit, while at the same time to preserve the progression of the book as a unified whole, a panoramic map of the poetics of Amos Oz's fiction. The few repetitions, then, are meant as a convenience for the reader.