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The Epistolary Politics of Amos Oz's *Black Box*

In ordinary novels, digressions are not permitted except insofar as they form another novel. One couldn't add thoughts [*de raisonnements*], because since none of the characters is brought there in order to think [*pour raisonner*], thinking would infringe upon the work's design and its nature. But in the letter form, where the actors are not chosen, and where the subjects to be treated are not dependent on any preformed design or plan, the author has given himself the advantage of being able to join philosophy, politics, and morals to a novel, and of connecting everything by a secret and in some sense unknown chain.¹

Montesquieu, preface to the *Persian Letters*

IN AN INTERVIEW GIVEN WHILE HE WAS still writing *Qufsah shehorah* (1987; hereinafter referred to by the title of the English translation, *Black Box*), Amos Oz referred to it as progeny of Montesquieu's political-letter fiction, "an epistolary novel, eighteenth-century in style."² The remark surprises when compared with Oz's more generally recognized admiration for nineteenth-century realists such as Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. Oz's use of epistolary form may have something to do with its importance during the formative years of the Hebrew novel in the early nineteenth century. David Patterson has demonstrated how early Hebrew prose

fiction authors such as Joseph Perl and Abraham Mapu were influenced by political uses of epistolary form by Montesquieu and by the Marquis d'Argens's in his *Lettres juives* (1736; *Jewish letters*).³ Like the realists, Oz strives to represent mimetically the reality of contemporary Israeli society; simultaneously like Montesquieu, he uses the letter form as a vehicle for political debate.

Black Box allows a polyphony of voices to explore reality. Amos Oz substantiates his striving for polyphonic texture in two further interviews. He notes in one that "I work with a polyphony of voices without necessarily taking sides with one character or another. I try to give a fair hearing, a fair understanding, a fair voice to each one of my 'fictitious' characters," and in another interview, he claims that

[i]f I write about a cast of characters, I am in the business of being any one of them and all of them at the same time. I can play tennis single-handedly, running from one side of the court to the other quickly enough to catch and respond. This is what the art of writing novels and stories is all about. Being able to put yourself in the shoes and under the skins of different people.⁴

If such are the goals and conditions of Oz's writing, he could scarcely have found a better form for achieving them than that of letter fiction.

Although several critics have addressed in general terms the contribution of epistolary form to the signifying process of *Black Box*, no one has tackled in depth the significance of Oz's choice of this form. Novelistic techniques particularly enabled by epistolary form include dialogism, perspectivism, and indirection. Following the clues that Oz himself provides in his quoted remarks, we will refer formal communicational aspects of epistolarity to the political usage made of them in Europe during the eighteenth century. As Montesquieu points out in the epigraph, epistolary form enabled a different kind of European novel to emerge, one in which authors could directly confront the issues of the day. We will therefore compare such usages with the complex communicational situations in *Black Box*.

What emerges from a sustained study of epistolarity in Oz's novel is that the novel's form conveys a metapolitical message: that is, rather than validate any particular political stance, the novel explores the terms under which political discussion and mutual understanding may take place. Participants in this dialogue include Ashkenazim and Sephardim, religious zealots and secularists. The implication is that up to the publication date of *Black Box*, such dialogue had been scarce and ripe with antagonism in the public sphere of Israeli society. While we will document many of the explicit political references in *Black Box*, we also wish politics to be understood in its broadest sense, to include questions of gender and the family. Oz acknowledges this connection when he provides an interesting reversal of our normal understanding of political

allegory: "Authors from the world's trouble spots are often suspected of using metaphor to express their political commitments. To me, political reality is a metaphor for personal or family conflict."⁵

Dialogism

The foremost theorist of dialogism, Mikhail Bakhtin, has noted that most letters are written "by" two people, so to speak, as the writer must always be aware of the letter's potential readings by its recipient: "epistolary form in and of itself does not predetermine the type of discourse. In general this form permits broad discursive possibilities, but it is best suited to . . . reflected discourse of another. A characteristic feature of the letter is an acute awareness of the interlocutor, the addressee to whom it is directed. The letter, like a rejoinder in a dialogue, is addressed to a specific person, and it takes into account the other's possible reactions, the other's possible reply. This reckoning with an absent interlocutor can be more or less intensive."⁶

The political implications of the dialogic letter form are broad. Dialogic form implies intersubjective rather than monologic truth. Beyond the overtly political letter fictions of the eighteenth century à la Montesquieu, the letter provided an appropriate structure for narratives of sensibility, which, although concerned usually with erotic or marriage plots, "supplied what was undoubtedly a potentially radical politics of subjectivity, promulgating a notion of exquisite individual sensibility which . . . was essentially self-authorizing rather than produced through subjection to any social structure (most especially the State) whatsoever."⁷

As an epistolary novel, *Black Box* consists mainly of letters (telegrams, notecards, and the report of a private investigator are also included) written or sent to each other by the major characters: Alex Gideon, a former Israeli army officer and now a world-renowned professor of political science in Chicago; Ilana Brandstetter (his ex-wife); Michel Sommo (Ilana's husband); Manfred Zakheim (Alex's lawyer); and Boaz Brandstetter (son of Alex and Ilana). Out of the exigencies of the present (Boaz's delinquency and rebellion, and Alex's impending death from cancer and attempt at reconciliation with his family and friends in Israel), these letters explore the past of every character. In doing so, they become diaries or confessions, which have always been "neighboring" genres of epistolary fiction.

Considering only letters, the epistolary exchange has the following structure: of the 49 letters forming the backbone of the novel, 13 are written by Ilana, 9 by Michel, 7 by Boaz, and 7 by Alex; on the other hand, 17 letters are addressed to Alex, 8 to Ilana, 8 to Michel, and 6 to Boaz. It is

interesting to note the division of function reflected in these statistics: Alex is the focal point for the various discourses of the novel, while he produces relatively little of it himself. In political terms, the father of the family no longer controls its logos. We might contrast this imbalance with Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* (1721), in which the patriarchal Usbek writes the majority of the letters, but also with the situation found in Choderlos de Laclos's *Liaisons dangereuses* (1782), whose main protagonists, Valmont and Merteuil, send and receive an almost equal number of letters.

Oz has carefully diversified the background of his letter writers: Alex was born in Palestine of Russian parents; Ilana emigrated from Poland; Michel is a Sephardic Jew who came to Israel from Morocco via Paris; Zakheim came from Germany. Only Boaz was born in an independent Israel. In these exchanges of letters, then, different segments and constituencies of Israeli society are engaging in dialogue. Through this dialogic confrontation between Jews coming largely from the Arab and Muslim countries (Sephardim)⁸ and Jews originating in Central and Eastern Europe (Ashkenazim), Oz incorporates the spirit of philosophical letter fiction.

The confrontation of the Other with the here and now of Europe, which was a major theme of the eighteenth-century philosophical letter novel, is transported to Israel, where "the hegemonic voice of the country has almost invariably been that of the Ashkenazim, while the Sephardi voice has been largely muffled or silenced."⁹ In *Black Box*, Michel becomes the spokesperson for the Oriental Jews, who constitute 68 percent of the Jewish population and 54 percent of the total population of Israel.¹⁰ The letter provides a convenient and highly visible form for Oz to allow each of his characters a voice, without narratorial filtering or judgment. Indeed, the entire novel is less a sequence of actions than a continual (re)presentation of the "divided word" of its letter writers. Scarcely a letter is written that does not speak of its potential reception and interpretation by its reader. For example, nearly all Ilana's letters to Alex are full of what Jakobson calls "conative" statements, which emphasize the addressee of the letter almost to the exclusion of its referential function.¹¹ Ilana's letters, as Rochelle Furstenberg points out, serve as "the fulcrum of the novel"; they not only represent "the deep libidinal force that moves the story forward,"¹² but also embody the dialogical principle. Thus, the very first words of the novel, the opening lines of Ilana's letter to Alex, speak not of "things," but rather, of the letter's potential nonreception.

The novel begins with Ilana's letter to Alex after seven years of no communication between them. Writing from Jerusalem, she implores Alex, now in Chicago, to use his connections and considerable financial wherewithal to keep their rebellious teenage son, Boaz, in school after he

has allegedly assaulted a teacher. Yet Ilana's first words, and indeed most of her letter, do not concern Boaz at all, but rather, Alex's reading of her letter: "If you didn't destroy this letter the moment you recognized my handwriting on the envelope, it shows that curiosity is stronger than hatred."¹³ Later, she questions the fate of her letters: "What have you done with my previous letters? Are they in the fire, or in the safe?" (39).¹⁴ Ilana provokes Alex's reading of her letter in two ways, in describing both his actions with her letter, and his innermost feelings in reading it. In her later letters, Ilana continues in her playfully provocative manner when she writes, "I enjoy thinking about the fury I've caused you with these two letters. Being furious makes you masculine and attractive, but also childlike and almost moving" (11).¹⁵ In passages such as these, Ilana shows the extent to which the process of her writing of letters to Alex is shaped by his anticipated reading of them. Ilana is like a populist politician, whose power over crowds derives from her ability to anticipate and deliver the language that the people wish to hear—her power lies in her apparent surrender of power.

Ilana parodies to perfection the discourse of patriarchy when she writes Alex:

אתה אדון שנאתי וגעגועי. עריץ חלומותי בלילות. מושל שערותי וגרוני וכפות-רגלי. שליט שדי בטני ערותי ורחמי. כשפחה אני מכורה לך. גם אם אתה שילחת אותי בחרפה אל פאתי הממלכה, אל המדבר, כמו הגר עם בנה ישמעאל, למות בצמא בישימון: בצמא אליך אדוני. (43)

You are the lord of my hatred and my longing. The master of my dreams at night. Ruler of my hair and my throat and the soles of my feet. Sovereign of my breasts my belly my private parts my womb. Like a slave girl I am in thrall to you. I love my lord. I do not want to be set free. Even if you sent me away in disgrace to the ends of the kingdom, to the desert like Hagar with her son Ishmael, to die of thirst in the wilderness, it would be thirst for you, my lord. (42–43)

Ilana's parody here derives from her appropriation of biblical discourse, which it should be Alex's right to use, dialogizing it by inserting a first-person, feminine subjectivity into what traditionally has been seen as masculine logoi. Ilana's "quotation" implies that Alex is capable of using such language—as Michel comes very close to doing when he accuses Ilana of adultery later in the novel. Indeed, Michel's last letter is a "straight" use of biblical discourse. Using an Ilanean strategy, it foregrounds the marginalized position (be it on gender or ethnic grounds) of the writer vis-à-vis the social power center of the reader. As a Sephardi eking out his livelihood, Michel addresses a wealthy Ashkenazi who has gained distinction both as a warrior and as an intellectual, when he writes Alex,

אתם מלח הארץ לכם הרכוש והשררה לכם החכמה והמשפט ואנחנו עפר תחת רגליכם. אתם הלויים והכוהנים ואנחנו שואבי־המים. אתם תפארת ישראל ואנחנו הערב־רב. בכם בחר ואתכם קידש להיות בנים לשכינה ואנחנו בנים חורגים. (190)

You are the salt of the earth, you have the property and the power, you have the wisdom and the judgment and we are dust under your feet. You are the priests and Levites and we are the drawers of water. You are the glory of Israel and we are the mixed multitude. He chose you and sanctified you as sons of the All-Present, while we are stepsons. (214)

As Ilana seeks to reduce the power differential created by gender by appropriating the dominant discourse and anticipating its pronouncements, so, too, Michel practices moral jiu-jitsu by placing words in Alex's mouth that he would, in fact, never say or write.

Alex is himself not capable of producing such monologic, patriarchal statements, as Ilana makes clear later:

ועדיין אתה מתחבא מפני בחדר השחור־לבן שלך. אתה לא תשוב. הפחד משתק אותך. זכר מרוט, מסתתר ורועד בחורו. האומנם הדרקון כה מהוה? דרקון מדולדל ונרפה? ערפד ממולא סמרטוטים? (80)

And you are still hiding from me in your black and white room. You will not return. You are paralyzed by fear. You exhausted, feeble male, hiding, trembling, in your hole. Is the dragon really so shabby? Such a floppy, sloppy dragon? A vampire staffed with rags? (84–85)

Alex, as Ilana's letters show, avoids dialogue, preferring to pontificate in his scholarly works. He is the supposed source of logos and paternal power, the god hidden in a cloud, yet he cannot bring himself even to command his own son to stop his rampages. Alex's responses to Ilana do, in fact, hide, avoiding dialogue by "sticking to the business at hand" and conducting as much of it as possible through intermediaries such as his lawyer, Zakheim. Alex begins his first letter, "Dear Madam," and ends it with an attempt at cutting off dialogue: "Over the remaining contents of your letter, including the gross lies, the gross contradictions, and the simple common, or garden, grossness, I shall pass in silence" (8).¹⁶ Alex's form of patriarchal discourse, then, if any, is silence.

It is significant that the true family patriarch, Alex's Russian father, Volodya, representative of the early generation of immigrants to Palestine, also fails in his last days to produce an unambiguous or foundational logos. Confined to a sanatorium, the old man takes stock of the transformation he underwent when he immigrated from Eastern Europe to the Levant. He notes in what initially seems senile babble the discrepancy between the dream of creating a Jewish homeland and his conception of its degenerate reality, when he says,

מה פלסטינה? ריאליה? פלסטינה חלום. חלום-קושמאר, אבל חלום. ואולי את הואלת לשמוע על-אודות הגבירה דולציניאה? כמוה היא גם פלסטינה. מור ולבונה בחלום, ואילו בריאליה — חזירות. יסורי חזירים. ולבוקר — והנה היא לאה! מה לאה. קדחת. אסיה עותומנית. (138)

What is Palestine? Realia? Palestine is dream. Palestine is *cauchemar*, but still is dream. Perhaps you have deigned to hear of Lady Dulcinea? Well, Palestine is like her. In the dream, myrrh and frankincense, but in realia swinery! Misery of swines. And in the morning—"behold it was Leah!" What Leah? Malaria. Ottoman Asia. (152)

These disjointed thoughts that flow out as stream of consciousness depict the disillusionment of the first Jewish pioneers, who, imbued with the idealism of creating a new homeland, came from middle-class Eastern Europe to the wilderness, marshes, heat, and hard labor of the Middle East. The dream that has come in contact with the harsh reality has become a nightmare, and along with it comes a sense of beguilement. Disabused, people come to terms with a reality far remote from the original cherished vision they carried in their mind's eye. Beyond that, however, the patriarch's discourse becomes the living-out of his nightmare in its failure to repress the difference of heteroglossia. The presence of Latin, French, and Spanish allow the Diaspora to continue speaking. The Babel of Volodya's speech represents the collapse of his empire, which was to be ruled by his son, Alexander. Volodya Godonsky shares his Hebrew name, Ze'ev Binyomin, with Theodore Herzl (1860–1904), the founder of political Zionism.¹⁷ Godonsky's secular orientation and escape for refuge from Russia to Ottoman Palestine clearly fit the agenda of Herzl's Zionist program. Despite the similarities, Volodya's lascivious disposition that celebrates wantonness disrupts the nearly sacrosanct representation of the Zionist movement.

The efforts of Volodya Godonsky's German-born attorney, Manfred Zakheim, to expand his patron's estate further bespeak the Zionist project of nation building. Manfred captures this enterprise as he describes his collusion with Volodya in building a nation out of the heteroglossia of disparate cultures in a letter to Alex:

יחד, בארבע ידיים, בנינו אימפריה מלא-כולום. זה היה עוד בשנות השלושים הסוערות. . . . התפלשתי למען אביך בחלאת אפנדים דגנרטים, התגאלתי בשיכר בריטי, התבוססתי עד כאן בפרוות הבולשביקיות של פקידי סוכנות מאנפפים, והכל — כדי לצבור בתחבולות דונם לדונם, אבן לאבן, לירה ללירה, את כל מה שאתה קיבלת ממני על טס, עטוף בניר מתנות וקשור בסרט כחול. (174)

Together the two of us built an empire out of nothing. It all began in the roaring thirties. . . . I wallowed for your father's sake in the filth of degenerate Arab effendis, in foul British beer, in the Bolshevik phrases of nasal officials of the Jewish Agency—and all so as cunningly to add acre to acre, stone to

stone, pound to pound, everything that you received from me on a silver tray, gift-wrapped and tied up with a blue ribbon. (195)

The conversion in this passage of the different cultural elements (including "Bolshevik" discourse) into the "neutral" elements of land and building stone is reversed in Volodya's revelation that heteroglossia and cultural difference could not ultimately be repressed.

Volodya and Manfred, both European Jews, represent in this passage the forces that controlled the sociopolitical nexus of the nascent Jewish homeland. In the 1960s this consolidated power was passed on to Alex. The "ideal" that Volodya Godonsky, the despotic, violent, and capricious father, seeks to achieve in raising his son is quite clear. Alexander, as his very name suggests, is to be of upright bearing, an *enfant sauvage*, conquering, and subduing—an antithesis to the image of the Diaspora Jew. The description of building the rambling estate in which Alex is raised carries resonances with the creation of the State of Israel.

These tensions between Occident and the Orient, between Zion and Diaspora, and between dream and reality are well captured in Oz's own family background, which he related in an interview:

[My father] came to Zion and settled in Jerusalem. . . . Having failed in business he went back into writing poetry, still in Russian, and still exactly the same sentimental stuff which he used to write when he was a teenager in Odessa. Jerusalem was a city paved with emeralds and with angels at every corner. . . . My parents used to talk to me about the vision of Jerusalem becoming one day a real city. It took me quite a long time to decipher what they really meant by "real." By "real," of course, they meant "European," with cathedrals and thick forests round about, and perhaps a river in the middle. . . . My father wanted me to become the archetype of the new Israeli: simple, blond, cleansed of Jewish neurosis, tough, gentile-looking. . . . I was meant to be a new leaf altogether: a *sabra*, tough, simple, unambivalent.¹⁸

Alex, as well as Oz, represents the dilemma of the Israeli encouraged to monologism and a stifling of the past. Arye Carmon underscores "the detachment from the past and an essentially stereotyped attitude toward it" as being problematic in the native-born Israeli's self-definition. He points out that Israel's founding fathers' negation of the Diaspora bespeaks "an ideologically-rooted denial of a connection with the yesterdays which, woven together, form the span of Jewish time."¹⁹ Uriel Tal adds that lack of awareness of one's multiple heritages leads to a deficient identity. Thus, "Zionism, as a return to Zion, created a new Galut, not an exile from the land but an exile from self-identity."²⁰ Alex's disease and his impending death, then, are undoubtedly the embodiment of his stifled emotional world.²¹

Having placed the main axis of correspondence between Jerusalem and Chicago, Oz seeks in the denouement to bring Zion and Diaspora into dialogue. The dynamics of individual psychology can be seen in *Black Box* to be identified with the manifestations of national pathology. Thus, conditions within Israel failed Alex by succumbing to an aberrant, extreme behavior that drove him away from his homeland. After he leaves Israel for abroad, seeking refuge in the Diaspora, Alex's academic publication wins him international reputation. Ironically, it is the topic of his research that clearly indicates that Alex's efforts to disengage himself from his former relations to Ilana and from Israeli society have been futile. His study expresses concern over the phenomenon of political extremism among his own people, and ultimately over the destiny of the State of Israel. Yet the inability to dialogue, which is the mark of political extremism, also cripples Alex, as we have seen.

Perspectivism

For many, the master narrative of perspectival philosophy is the story of the blind men and the elephant, where each man, feeling a different part of the elephant, describes it as a totally different creature. Oz, however, recounts a different joke that

baffled me every time I heard it. Two men arguing about which of them owns a piece of goods ask a rabbi to say which of them is the rightful owner. The rabbi listens to the first man and then gives judgment in his favour. Then he listens to the second man and comes down on his side too. Back home he tells the story to his wife, who says, "How on earth could you have decided that both of them were right?" "Well, I guess you're right, too," he replies. I think this story is still valid today.²²

This story seems to lie at the heart of Oz's political activism in favor of peace negotiations and a Palestinian state, and against the "moral autism" of those who cannot comprehend Palestinian and Arab perspectives.²³ Each character in this story is analogous to a letter writer of *Black Box*, with his or her own unique perspective on the world with which the other characters are bound to disagree. For a novel whose main theme is fanaticism, Oz has chosen the dialogic epistolary form in which fanaticisms—Sommo's nationalism and Gideon's universalism being the prime examples—are sure to confront and mutually moderate each other.

Epistolary form also enables readers of *Black Box* to recognize their own prejudices in their first, cursory evaluation of the novel's characters. The characters in *Black Box* resemble a dramatic landscape seen from a moving train or bus: each glance the passenger makes through the

window yields a different viewpoint, with its accompanying evaluative mood. A group of twenty American students reading *Black Box* (in English translation) as part of a course on intimist forms of fiction (letters, diaries, and confessions) were asked to rank the characters in order of preference. Each of the major characters except Zakheim was chosen by at least two students. Students also tended to preface their evaluations with comments such as: "I don't really like any of the characters (though I do like the novel)"; or, more frequently, "My original preference for X has given way to a preference for Y." One student began her paper on the novel as follows: "After reading the first 100 pages of the novel . . . I ranked the main characters in order of my preference, with Michel as my favorite, followed by Alex, Ilana, Boaz, and Manfred. But after reading the entire novel, my opinions on and order of preference for the characters have both changed drastically. Currently, I would rank Boaz as my favorite character, followed by Alex, Ilana, Manfred, and my least favorite, Michel."²⁴

There are two main reasons for *Black Box's* ability to have this effect on its readers. One relates to the actual changes that the characters undergo, through dialogism or other processes. For example, Alex's "hard edges" soften with the onset of his debilitating cancer. Replying to Michel's letter in which he is demonized, Alexander describes himself as "a deposed demon . . . fuzzy from pills. A polite, quiet demon making an effort not to become a burden, and almost pleasant-mannered" (225). In the letter, Alex compassionately allays Michel's fear concerning his amorous relationship with Ilana. Deflecting the harsh accusations and epithets directed at him, Alex responds in a letter that expresses sympathy both in its length and content. This is Alex's longest and most intimate letter, where, for the first time, he tells about his family and childhood and concludes it with great affinity.

The other, equally important, reason for the reader's perspective changing relates to the perspectivism peculiar to epistolary fiction: all our information about the characters comes from the characters, and hence is always "tainted" and subject to revision. We tend to read epistolary discourse in two contradictory ways: on the one hand, a letter establishes the authenticity of the writer's feelings and viewpoints; on the other hand, a letter is not a scientific article—such as Alex might write—nor a work of philosophy. It conveys a subjective point of view. Hence, a letter's truth lies not in its referential aspects, but in its ability to express a dialogic confrontation with perceived truth. There results a defamiliarization that doubled as *philosophie*, that critical confrontation with the here and now of Europe that became the Enlightenment. The fictional line descends from Marana's *Espion turc* (1684) through Dufresnay's

Amusements sérieux (1699), Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (1721), Marquis d'Argens's *Lettres chinoises* (1740), Madame de Graffigny's *Lettres d'une péruvienne* (1747), to Oliver Goldsmith's *Citizen of the World* (1762) and José Cadalso's *Cartas marruecas* (1789).

In Marana's work, for example, the forerunner of all the later titles, the Turk Mahmut is sent to France disguised as a Moldavian monk. His mission is to investigate the Christian empire and send his reports home to Constantinople. European Orientalism appears in this work as homesickness. The open conflict with the Ottoman empire, which had earlier been fictionalized into letters of the Great Turk and responses of Christian princes, has here become a sort of miscegenation. Marana does preserve the tension between Christianity and Islam. Although Mahmut becomes a Christian for the sake of disguise, his assumption of Western vestments and mannerisms soon begins to shake the foundations of his faith. The letter form plays multiple roles in Mahmut's drama. First of all, by having a Turk write his letters, Marana "defamiliarizes" the use of the letter to report "facts" about other countries. The accounts of France are so obviously colored by Mahmut's perspectives, his mission, and his confusions, that it would seem that a sharp-eyed reader of this work would never pick up a letter newspaper again (at least not in order to read news). More fundamental, however, is the centrality of the letter to Mahmut's self-definition. Without the letter's tenuous trail leading back to Constantinople, it seems unlikely that the Turkish spy could prevent the complete collapse of his old values and his complete absorption into the West. He writes his letters in order to reinforce the pillars of his position: "the appropriate remedy for my pain was writing to you" (*le remède spécifique à ma douleur était de t'écrire*).²⁵ In this sense, the *Espion turc* is also a *Bildungsroman*, a documentation about the painful reconstructions of the self.

Reading Marana, the French baron Montesquieu was struck by his ability to create an anti-novel, or what he calls a "type of novel" (21; *une espèce de roman*), the *Lettres persanes*, in which Usbek travels from Isfahan to Paris, and spends nine years there. Usbek's letters are full of comparisons between French and Persian governmental, social, and religious systems. Like the Turkish spy, he is shaken in his cultural rootedness. In turn, Madame de Graffigny's *Lettres d'une péruvienne* destabilize Montesquieu's work. Whereas every comparison Usbek makes between France and Persia tends to show the superiority of the former, Graffigny's comparisons between Europe and the Inca empire show instead the reversibility of categories of social superiority—Zilia, the captured Peruvian princess transported to France, repeatedly calls the French barbarians. Whereas Usbek practices hypocrisy as the méconnaissance necessary to the ego's survival, Zilia experiences it as the surface

effects of the various cultural phenomena she describes, as a theatrical performance differing from those she is used to.

Oz's philosophical letter novel similarly expresses the existential condition of its characters, their delimited associations, and their mutual alienation. Alex leaves Israel after his divorce and completely cuts off contact with his family, as his ex-wife, Ilana reiterates. At the end of the novel, Michel, Ilana's second husband, refuses to maintain contact with Ilana after his rabbi declares her "a rebellious wife." Ilana's and Alex's son, Boaz, is first described as an itinerant who keeps in touch through intermittent short messages and appeals for help. The fluctuating correspondences reflect the changes that transpire in the personal relationships of the characters. In the beginning of the novel, Ilana is with Michel and corresponds with Alex. By the end of the novel, Ilana is by Alex's deathbed and writes a long letter to Michel. Both Alex and Boaz, whom Ilana repeatedly finds hard to reach, are at the end of the novel by her side and well within reach. The hidden axis of the letter novel lies in its striving for self-cancellation, whereby correspondence is to be replaced not merely by physical closeness, but by a near-mystical bonding well expressed when Ilana, in her last letter to Michel, envisions herself, Alex, and Michel fusing "to be one" (259).²⁶ As Janet Altman has pointed out in her study of epistolarity, letter fiction generally achieves closure either "comically," through the uniting of two lovers or friends who have been separated, or "tragically," with the death of one or more correspondents.²⁷ Oz's novel combines these two possibilities for closure.

No character better represents the changes wrought by perspectivism than Boaz. Readers inevitably experience Boaz first as an unsympathetic juvenile delinquent and a mere excuse for bringing the other characters together, only to watch him grow in stature and sympathy through the novel. In the depiction of Boaz, there is a focus on the self-definition problem of the native-born Israeli, for he is deeply rooted in his time and place but is ill-suited to any plan, design, or ideology beyond the immediate here and now. Unlike other characters who long for other times, he seems to live in an eternal present. His letters always report on what he is doing at present or ask for help, never dwelling on his past. Similarly, he rejects his paternal models.²⁸ In contrast with his father, he is neither a man of words nor of theories. In contrast with his stepfather's terrestrial land speculation and out-and-out pragmatism, Boaz's avid interest in the stars bespeaks his idealism. He is an adolescent who has internalized his parents' quarrels, become a juvenile delinquent and a rootless vagabond, only to end up renovating his grandfather's dilapidated estate. Depicted as a Tarzan who settles in a "jungle," he endeavors to turn it into a flourishing green garden. Creating there his

own commune, he can be seen to have created his own settlement that is within the 1967 borders and that upholds tolerance, respect, and working the land.²⁹ His tracing the roots to his family house in Zikhron seems to indicate a return to the origin, coming back to a genesis, which significantly precludes any prior Diaspora past.

Oz seems to be sending a missive of his own in which he expresses a harking back to a pioneering spirit that eschews materialism and consumerism, for in Zikhron we see the pretentious, outlandish, and extravagant replaced with the wholesome, unadorned simplicity of Boaz's commune. The lifestyle bespeaks a return to an earthbound authenticity, for instead of Volodya's occupation as a dealer with land and importer of iron who hires Circassian workers to till the land, all commune members, including Boaz, till the land and subsist on its produce. The rare varieties of imported roses, which Alex remembers from his childhood, and which have long ago died, are replaced with a green garden. The goldfish that used to be in an ornamental pond are replaced with carp. In place of the fine Italian tiles that were stolen, Boaz casts a gray concrete floor.³⁰ The smell of cigars and vodka that is replaced by the smell of the sea and the desert in the renovated estate is a not merely a culture/nature juxtaposition, but an evocation of two individuals, namely, Volodya and Boaz, and their countries of origin—Russia and Israel (134).

From another perspective, Volodya and Boaz, along with Ilana, Alex, and Manfred, who have European family roots, can be juxtaposed to Michel, whose family originated in Morocco. Michel's family immigrated from Algeria to Paris in 1954, but it was after undergoing religious Zionist education in Paris that Michel emigrated to Israel in 1960 (31–32).³¹ Michel's own description of his family's experience reveals him to epitomize a perpetual Other. Thus, he writes Boaz, "We suffered . . . in Algeria in our time, first from the Arabs as Jews and later in Paris from the Jews as Arabs and from the French as *pieds noirs*" (49).³² Through biographical snippets of various letters, the marginalization experienced by Oriental Jews within Israeli society emerges as well. The ethnic gulf that becomes prominent at the denouement of the novel is well elucidated by Ella Shohat, when she observes that "although Zionism claims to provide a homeland for all Jews, that homeland was not offered to all with the same largess. Sephardi Jews were first brought to Israel for specific European-Zionist reasons, and once there they were systematically discriminated against by a Zionism which deployed its energies and material resources differentially, to the consistent advantage of European Jews and to the consistent detriment of Oriental Jews."³³

Representing the dominant Ashkenazi class, the attorney Manfred Zakheim—in his biting sarcasm and blatant ethnic prejudice—well elucidates the experience of Otherness that Michel encounters within the State

of Israel. Describing his impressions of having met Michel, Manfred writes Alex:

אגב, האמת היא שהסומו לגמרי לא צורח. להיפך, מדבר יפה מאוד, בטונים רבים ומעוגלים, עדינות דידקטית חייבנית, כמו של אינטלקטואל קתולי. אלה עברו, כנראה, בדרך מאפריקה לארץ, הסבה יסודית מאוד בפריס. כלפי חוץ הוא מופיע כמעט יותר אירופאי ממך או ממני. (25)

Incidentally, the fact is, [Michel] Sommo does not whine greedily. On the contrary, he speaks very nicely, in soft, rounded tones, with a smiling, didactic refinement, like a Catholic intellectual. These people have apparently undergone, on the way from Africa to Israel, a thoroughgoing refit in Paris. Outwardly he seems more European than you or me. (21)

Later in the conversation, Manfred notes, "At last I managed to ruffle his calm. The Parisian patina shattered and the African fury erupted like pus" (23).³⁴

Explicating the psychological dynamics of the oppressed, Frantz Fanon explains,

I begin to suffer from not being a white man to the degree that the white man imposes discrimination on me, makes me a colonized native, robs me of all worth, all individuality, tells me that I am a parasite on the world, that I must bring myself as quickly as possible into step with the white world. . . . Then I will quite simply try to make myself white: that is, I will compel the white man to acknowledge that I am human.³⁵

Manfred Zakheim indeed calls Michel "that ape" (22). Eliding the inferiority complex as a direct product of racist/ethnic prejudice, he also derides the European guise of Michel, a North African Jew, who immigrated to Paris and then to Israel. Having been inculcated with high regard for European civilization and a demeaning self-conception, this Sephardi Jew is now mocked for his emulation of the purported role model. Manfred's blatant prejudice clarifies the bind in which the Sephardim find themselves. They encounter Ashkenazi condescension regardless of the conduct they adopt, be it Oriental or Occidental. And Zakheim's own condescension is passed on to the reader without comment.

Early in the novel, Michel is portrayed as possessing insight into the soul of Boaz, his rebellious teenage stepson. He finds much similarity between his and Boaz's adolescence and thus tries to instill in Boaz his own values. Although initially, Boaz is responsive to Michel's overtures, he later comes to distance himself from Michel's indoctrinating onslaught. In fact, the didactic tone, which Michel comes to adopt toward other characters as one who incarnates morality and righteousness at any given moment, satirizes him. But the Ashkenazi characters are satirized

as well—Ilana with her narcissistic and restless libido, Alex with his conceit and self-consuming tendencies, Boaz in being crude and simple-minded, and Manfred as pathetic and ludicrous.

Laying a guilt trip upon Alex for abandoning his wife and son, Michel channels the vast sums entrusted to him by Alex, ostensibly for the care of Boaz and Ilana, toward “redeeming” Jewish historical sites in the West Bank. The period in which Alex, with great equanimity, complies with Michel’s milking scheme is the mid- to late 70s.³⁶ It is the period when we witness the once virile and strong Alex to be ailing with cancer. He seems to represent, then, the once powerful and vibrant Ashkenazi-controlled Labor party, which, for the first time in Israel’s history, lost the elections to the right-wing Likud, greatly supported by the Sephardim.

In his portrayal of Michel, Oz masterfully blends “humility and self-effacement with sanctimonious arrogance [that] approaches an invidious religious fanaticism.”³⁷ As a person quickly augmenting his political clout, Michel can be seen to represent Israel’s religious right, which Oz observed to be well able to manipulate its vision of “Greater Israel” into national political policy. Juxtaposed to this is Alex, the author of *The Desperate Violence: A Study in Comparative Fanaticism*, who “represents the forces that through territorial compromise would arrest the phenomenon of such extremism.”³⁸ Lavie counters this commonplace vision of the ethnic divide among many progressive Ashkenazim as she writes,

The Mizrahim [Orientals] voted for the Right in order to protest the patronizing Ashkenazi oligarchy of the Labor Left, even though most Likud leaders are Ashkenazim. Paradoxically, the Mizrahi Likud voters could sympathize with Begin’s anti-Arab ideology because the Labor party, in the process of socializing Mizrahim into the Jewish nation-state, had taught them to hate themselves for originating in the “primitive” Arab world.³⁹

Viewing Michel in *Black Box* as sheer representation of right-wing Sephardim would do grave injustice to the novel, whose characters are complex and rife with paradox. Furthermore, David Gorvich’s reference to *Black Box*, within his discussion of postmodernism in Hebrew literature, offers that “a hyperrealistic, exaggerated, noisy language that works on extreme romantic dichotomies while recycling its heroes’ clichés is a critical testimony to the wearing-out of the Zionist metaplot for which these heroes serve as mouthpiece.”⁴⁰

A mutual defamiliarization takes hold on the correspondents across the ocean. From Alex’s position in secular Chicago (enabling to his “scientific” perspective, which rejects all religious views as fanatical), Michel’s ultra-Jewish discourse is incomprehensible. In Israeli society, where the camps of “orthodox” and “secular” are sharply drawn, the dates of the Jewish calendar with which Michel heads his letters signal his

placement "outside" Alex's system. Yet Alex's own political perspective is presented on a series of notecards, rather than as a coherent viewpoint.

Indirection

Synonymous with terms such as "purloining" and "forgery," epistolary indirection emphasizes the inevitable triangularity involved in epistolary exchange. The turning of the letter's theoretically dyadic structure into a triangular one is essential to the genre of epistolary fiction. Perhaps Oz knows that Samuel Richardson's villain, Lovelace, intercepts Anna Howe's letters to the heroine, Clarissa, reads them, and derives from his snooping the usual advantages of "knowledge is power." Clarissa—turnabout is fair play—later persuades Lovelace's confidant Belford to show her the villain's letters, from which she finally realizes the full implications of his despicableness. From her own correspondence and that of her nemesis, Clarissa constructs her memorial and vindication, the text of the novel *Clarissa* (1748). Or perhaps he knows that in Choderlos de Laclos's *Liaisons dangereuses*, the Vicomte de Valmont coerces Madame de Tourvel's maid into handing over her mistress's letters, which Valmont proceeds to steam open and read, and that the dying Valmont hands over the Marquise de Merteuil's letters to him, the publication of which disgrace her. Again, these purloined correspondences provide the textual basis of this novel. Such purloinings, to which others could be added, are classic moments in epistolary fiction.

In many ways, the triangular aspect of epistolary communication is more fundamental to its fictional appearances than is the dyadic. For example, Ross Chambers has pointed out the inadequacy of narratology's reliance on a Jakobsonian, dyadic (narrator-narratee) model of literary communication. Chambers notes that textual effects lie precisely in what escapes the intersubjective exchange. Discourse's ability to escape the Jakobsonian channels of transmission and reception takes on a political dimension:

the interpretable dimension of discourse in its "textual function" is a manifestation of something that traditional Western culture has viewed as unsettling and dangerous, that is, of discursive uncontrollability. No check is possible on such discourse: I mean both that it cannot be verified (cf. French *contrôlé*) at its source (for there is no origin, no accountability) and that it cannot be stopped at its point of reception (for instead of a point of reception, there is the limitless process of supplementation we call interpretability).⁴¹

If Bernard Bray reduces the letter to a dialogue over distance, where "The 'I' and the 'you' count more than the 'he,'"⁴² Franc Schuerewegen counters this view by noting that between sender and receiver there is the

post office, a powerful machine not always to be trusted.⁴³ The purloined letter is essential to the genre itself—the third, unintended reader is the text's most essential reader.

Ilana's first letter opens this theme, immediately placing herself, Alex, and Michel in a triangle where money, sex, and meaning all can circulate. After offering to sleep with Alex in return for his help in locating Boaz, she notes: "If you feel like destroying me . . . send [a copy of this letter] to my husband" (7).⁴⁴ Alex seems to agree, noting as a postscript to his first letter: "P. S. I am keeping your letter" (8).⁴⁵ Alex's remark immediately "readdresses" the letter to Michel, and the attentive reader begins to imagine the contents from this third party's as yet unknown point of view. However, we gradually discover that Alex, beyond never making use of his threat, in fact believes that Ilana wrote the letter under Michel's direction, charging the latter's blatant request for money with her own eroticism and poetics. In Alex's eyes, then, Ilana's letters are "double voiced," dictated by Michel's ambitions, but translated into Ilana's sensualism. Similarly, Alex fears that Ilana passes his own letters on to Michel: "Have you let him read my letters? I presume he insists on his right to read them before you and perhaps even to censor them here and there" (64).⁴⁶ Michel is, in Alex's eyes, a Lovelace, a controller, purloiner, forger of discourse. Michel's indirection becomes blatant when he "channels much of the largesse entrusted to him by Alex ostensibly for the care of Boaz and Ilana toward 'redeeming' Jewish historical sites in the West Bank."⁴⁷ Furthermore, imbued with this new politico-religious zeal, Michel tries to implant Boaz in the West Bank.

Alex blames Ilana of out-and-out collusion with Michel's indirection, when he writes of her "plot to team Boaz up with [Michel] Sommo as to outflank [him]" (90). But when Ilana is finally by Alex's side as his health condition is critical, Michel invites him to convalesce in his and Ilana's home in Jerusalem. Ilana is quick, then, to deride this "magnanimous act" when she says, "It's creeping annexation, Alex. He's got the impression that you've weakened, and that the time is right to annex us all under the wings of his presence" (252).⁴⁸ Ilana shares with Michel this mocking statement in her last letter to him. Rebellious against an acquiescence with Michel's tactics, Ilana opts to stay with Alex. Yet, seeking unity rather than discord, both Alex and Ilana, each in his/her turn, implore Michel to come join them in Zikhron Yaakov, within the 1967 border. This ventriloquism is necessary, however, because Alex can only communicate with Ilana through a third party: "Ilana uses her first letters as a Trojan horse to penetrate through Alexander's fortifications. For Alexander, who is ill-disposed to maintaining unmediated personal contact, the letters are a convenient means of communication, a way to conduct his life by 'remote control.'"⁴⁹

This triangularity lies at the heart of a relationship that cannot be dyadic because of Alex's uncommunicative nature. Alex's reasons for leaving Ilana are associated with their self-destructive relationship. Ilana describes the couple as using Boaz to communicate: "Sometimes I would fix you with my eyes as though I were hypnotizing you, only so you would not be able to look at me. And the child, like a social worker, would act as intermediary for us, asking me to pour you more coffee, you to pass me the cream cheese" (77).⁵⁰ Alex's inability to communicate directly with Ilana results in his invention of bedroom triangle games, which eventually lead Ilana to commit adultery. As she reminds Alex, the desire for triangular relationship seems appealing to all parties: "That's how the game began. The shadow of a third person in our bed. We would conjure up some man who happened to have caught my fancy. And you impersonated him. Sometimes you impersonated both of you, yourself and the stranger. My role was to give myself to both of you alternately or simultaneously" (167–68).⁵¹ After their divorce, instead of speaking directly with his son, with Ilana, or with her husband, Michel, Alex instead works through agents such as Zakheim: "All this [manipulation of Ilana, Boaz, and Michel] you did without even bothering to emerge from your thick cloud. Like a deadly satellite. All by remote control. Just by pressing a button" (125), Ilana angrily accuses Alex.

Beyond the psychology of the sexual relationship between the two characters, however, the point is that only Ilana's sensualism could bring the radically different discourses of Alex and Michel into dialogue. Ilana is also a bone of contention between the two men, whose attitude toward each other is of both repulsion and attraction. The depiction of two men who partake of the same woman reappears in three of Amos Oz's last novels (*Menuḥah nekhonah*, *Qufsaḥ sheḥorah*, and *Lada'at isha*). Gershon Shaked further discerns a replicated pattern whereby "the women in these men's lives are merely a transference of the homosexual desire of those who seek in the male friend the 'alter ego' that would rescue them from their decline."⁵² Ilana notes Michel's yearning to unite both with her and with Alex. This experience is described by Ilana as primordial, akin in its intensity to childbearing or dying. The maternal in Ilana is expressed when she sees Alex and Michel each as both her husband and her baby (42, 116–17, 165, 246, 248).⁵³

But there is also a political dimension to this triangle. Marda Dunsky sees Ilana as the "incarnation of the Land of Israel herself: a sensual and seductive object of desire; a prize to be controlled, yet at the same time controlling. The web she spins is so perfectly seamless in its circularity."⁵⁴ The relationship of the two men to Ilana serves as an allegory to the issue perpetuating the Zionist vision within the contending constituents jockeying for power within Israeli society during a political watershed in the

history of the country. Allegorically, Ilana represents the land, to be desired and fought over. As Alex's relationship with Ilana is inextricably bound both emotionally and metaphorically to his relationship with the homeland, it is interesting to note that in his letter to Ilana, Alex acknowledges that his attempts to extricate himself from his bond and attraction to her have been to no avail (87, 94, 101).⁵⁵

Conclusion

In *Black Box*, Amos Oz uses the dialogic principle of the letter form to give long-suppressed discourses a voice in the Israeli public sphere. The device of indirection is used in order to show the commonality of those voices to bring them into. Oz uses perspectivism in order not to foreclose any of the various viewpoints of his characters, who emerge from such radically different cultures and histories. Nili Carmel-Plumin points out that the use of letters and the lack of an omniscient narrator spring out of Oz's disinclination to judge. Rather, he "lets reality speak through the heroes of its drama and sound its polyphonic voice where his own voice is integrated within the deliberation."⁵⁶ This is not to say that Oz achieves an objective equality between the voices of his characters, but it is to say that his text avoids ideological foreclosure from any particular political perspective. Oz creates with epistolary form a "black box" of Israeli political discourses, subject to further—and possibly endless—interpretation.

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NOTES

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