

# Language and Reality in the Prose of Amos Oz

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## 1. *Introduction*

In an interview given in the late 1970s, Amos Oz talked about the effect of the books he has loved: "If the books I have loved did something to me . . . they broke all the distinctions for me, floor and window, window and door, positive and negative, good and evil. They opened up the world in front of me with all its unending complexity, with all the abundance it has to offer" (1978). Speaking about the "great books," and about the sought-after effect of his own books, Oz did not mention any thematic issues, but rather delineated a general attitude towards the world, its complexity and abundance. Implicitly Oz touches in this answer upon one of the fundamental difficulties he had to cope with from the very beginning of his literary career. The world is depicted in his work as a volatile, complex existence, in which contradictory forces metamorphosize into each other and coexist with each other through struggle and reconciliation. Language, in contrast, consists of fixed, unequivocal signs, whose meanings are built by means of differences and distinctions. Moreover, the forces that attract Oz's protagonists are primal forces, precultural and prelingual. Oz's characters are spellbound by experiential realms where holiness and sin, light and darkness, flow inseparably. How is it possible, then, to use language, which is built on dichotomies, which separates and scatters its references, to describe a primordial world, an existence without distinctions and differentiations? An examination of the story "Before His Time," the earliest story of Oz's first book, reveals that the tension between the nature of language and the nature of the world has shaped the prose of Oz, its style and structure, from its inception. The solutions to this issue that Oz found in writing "Before His Time" would serve him throughout his career to its present phase. In this article I discuss the several tactics Oz exercises in "Before His Time" in order to bridge the gap between language and reality. The final part of the article draws some conclusions concerning Oz's subsequent work.

## 2. *The primeval waters*

"Before His Time" is Amos Oz's third story (1962), and the first to be included later in his first book, *Where the Jackals Howl* (1965).<sup>1</sup> In many respects this story serves as a model for Oz's subsequent work, his short stories as well as his novels.<sup>2</sup> Before elaborating on the various means Oz has used to overcome the fundamental difference between language and his protagonist's complicated existence, it is necessary to briefly describe the main themes of the story.

2.1 Oz's comments on the work of Berdyczewski, whom he describes as his "family relative," offer an illuminating insight into the world of

“Before His Time”: “When coming to write a story his attitude was somewhat skeptical. That is, people indeed hold all sorts of opinions, yet these opinions are no more than a restrained and dignified version of primal forces, just as a domestic dog is merely the tamed descendent of the wild wolf. And when the reins become undone the dog will again become the wolf—only then do Berdyczewski’s stories reach their true nature” (1979, pp. 30-31). As his essential theme is those primeval forces, Berdyczewski did not bother to bestow a psychological completeness to his protagonists: “It was neither psychology nor ideology, but different topics altogether which interested him. . . . His center of gravity was elsewhere. Often, he created his protagonists not as men of flesh and blood but as earthly representatives of hidden powers and of the forces of nature. And thus, Berdyczewski’s stories are filled with demigods, devils, demons, and angels of destruction” (p. 31). This article is undoubtedly Oz’s best description of his own work. The notion that the “dog is merely the tamed descendent of the wild wolf” is expressly conveyed in “Before His Time” (p. 73. See below). Indeed, the theme of this story, like that of Berdyczewski’s work, centers around the primordial forces throbbing within the human psyche, and it, too, is filled with “demigods, devils, demons, and angels of destruction.”

2.2 The great interest Oz displays in the primeval forces which rule the soul and the universe is already apparent in his first two stories.<sup>3</sup> In the story “Purple Coast” (1962), which preceded “Before His Time,” one can clearly perceive this theme through the allegorical veil. The tale describes a group of travelers spending their lives in a never-ending journey upon the ocean. Only the narrator does not take part in the ship’s life of complacency and abandonment. Each morning he sees strange illusions—*islands, purple shores, tall palms*—and these visions disturb his peace. He seeks to bring the news of these islands’ existence to the attention of his fellow travelers, and these tidings are a call for rebellion. However, his attempted mutiny fails. The masses of passengers flee to their cabins and the narrator is declared dead by the ship’s captain. At the captain’s order he is cast into the sea to be buried in a nautical grave.

What is the meaning of this strange tale? What is the significance of the characters borrowed from Babylonian and Greek mythology, who inhabit the ship’s deck? In attempting to expose the human condition and the forces which drive people, Oz turned to the primordial waters, from which the world itself was created according to various traditional myths. The ocean’s waters in this story are full of instincts and desires. This is evident already in the story’s opening lines, “At night the ship moved over the ocean like a caress over the warm sea. . . . The passions of the sea penetrated into the ship and hovered over its decks like a thin mist” (p. 202 [in Balaban, 1986]). The powerful generative forces that reside within the ocean are personified by Dita, the beloved of both the captain and the narrator. Dita, whose name is a shortened form of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, is described throughout the story in terms of the ocean waters.

In sharp contrast to the various myths of creation, the primordial

waters, the monster of the depths, are by no means subdued in Oz's story. This theme is expressed through the figure of Morduk, an allusion to Marduk, the creator of the universe in Babylonian mythology. Morduk's fears of the opening of the chimneys of the heavens, of a new flood, refer to the mythological tale: after splitting Tiamat and creating the firmament with half of her body, Marduk stationed guards to prevent Tiamat from releasing her waters. From the story "Purple Coast" it becomes evident that the guards failed in their assignment. The ocean is portrayed as the flood waters (many biblical allusions depict the ship and its passengers as the Ark of Noah with its many animals on board), and Morduk fears another flood. In other words, Tiamat did not perish—she is as powerful as ever.

In all, the story depicts two elements, two principles of existence: on the one hand, there is the feminine element, symbolized by the ocean, the ring, darkness and the unconscious; on the other hand, there is the masculine element symbolized by land, a straight line, light, consciousness. These two elements are not of comparable strengths or levels. The ocean is portrayed as authentic reality, full of vitality and desires. The land is sprouting forth from this ocean and is still under constant threat of being flooded by its waters. Furthermore, the land in this story is merely a mirage, unverified, and perceived by one man only. The implications of this plot are clear: consciousness, the lit areas of the soul, grew from the dark depth of the unconscious, and its existence is still fragile, uncertain, like a new island that can be flooded at any moment once again by the ocean.

In his search for the primeval origins of the soul, Oz turned in this instance to the myth of creation, to the primal struggle between Marduk and Tiamat. Several allusions to the story also refer to the struggle of creation in Greek mythology (the name of the captain's dog is Titan, etc.). This search to unveil the primeval forces of the psyche and of the universe will appear throughout Oz's work. Like Berdyczewski, Oz gives up the "psychology" of his characters, and tries to uncover the primal roots of the human soul. Time and again water will appear as a central symbol in his writings, representing the deep primeval waters, Tiamat, or in Jungian terms, the collective unconscious.<sup>4</sup>

2.3 It is quite clear that the theme of "Before His Time" also concerns the underlying foundations raging within the soul. Oz even uses here the main symbols of "Purple Coast." The kibbutz is illustrated as an illuminated island, whereas the jackals and the darkness are likened to waves of a sea threatening to flood the island. The drama of creation, the battle between Marduk and Tiamat, is expressed in this story as a struggle between God and Satan, Osiris and Seth, man and jackal.

### 3. *The kibbutz: Myth is Reality*

"Before His Time" revolves around the last night of Samson the bull and of Dov Sirkin, a former kibbutz member who now lives in Jerusalem. Samson has lost his fertility after being bitten by a mad jackal and has been condemned to the slaughter. Dov Sirkin sits in his room

designing, as he often does, a splendid world of Titanic proportions. During the evening he hears footsteps approaching his door, and imagines that the advancing stranger is his son Ehud who fell years ago in a reprisal raid of the Israeli Army. In the past, on the kibbutz, Dov had raged a war on the jackals that prowled outside the gates of the kibbutz. In his last moments, as the cries of the jackals penetrate into his house, he admits that in the war against the jackals, it is the jackals who laugh last.

3.1 The story opens in a 'spargamus,' the death of the protagonist and the scattering of the pieces of his flesh: "The bull was warm and strong on the night of his death. In the night, Samson the bull was slaughtered. Early in the morning, before the five o'clock milking, a meat trader from Nazareth came and took him away in a grey tender. Portions of his carcass were hung on rusty hooks in the butcher shops at Nazareth. The ringing of church bells roused droves of flies to attack the bull's flesh, swarming upon it and exacting a green revenge" (p. 59). The similarity to the story of Osiris, identified with the bull-deity Apis, is apparent: like Osiris, the god of fertility, Samson was the mating bull and he too fell victim to forces representing the primal waters.<sup>5</sup> Osiris was slaughtered by Seth, his brother, representing the cruel sea. The bull was bitten by the jackals, described in the story as waters of a dark sea. Moreover, the jackals, like Seth, are referred to later in the story as "a cursed brother." The fact that upon his death Samson is described as returning to a fetal position (p. 61) calls to mind the cyclic nature of Osiris' life.

Typical of his style, Oz does not content himself with only one mythological tale as a background for the story. The vile flies that swarm upon the bull's flesh are not portrayed as flies merely seeking to appease their hunger. They exact a "green revenge" from the dead bull. What is the function of this anthropomorphism? In the following sentences of the story the reader learns that the bull's hide is destined to be used for holy pictures depicting the story of Jesus. In this context one cannot overlook Christian symbolism in which the fly represents evil and sin (Ferguson, 1961, p. 12). One may further note that the founders of Christianity regarded the bull as a symbol of Christ (Ibid, p. 22).

The confrontation between the bull's flesh and the flies was preceded by a confrontation between the bull and the jackals. The jackals embody the primeval waters that grew flesh and blood and wailings.<sup>6</sup> These struggles have two parallels in the human sphere: the war Dov conducts against the jackals and the confrontation between Jews and Arabs. It is no coincidence that Arabs from Nazareth buy the bull's hide and flesh. And likewise, Ehud, Dov's son, is described in language which clearly alludes to the description of the bull (p. 62), whose fate Ehud shares. The young commander falls in a battle with the Arabs. The jackals tearing at his dead flesh finish off what the Arabs began.

The mythical element of the story has a Jewish aspect as well. The descriptions of Dov as the "ruler" of the orchards (p. 63) and as the "master of the orchards" (p. 64) cast him as a godly figure, as Adam. However, the depiction of his motives to leave the kibbutz, "And he set out to roam the land and leave his fingerprint on it" (p. 62), cannot but

recall Satan who encounters God's children as he "roams the land and wanders in it" (Job, 1:7, 2:2). Furthermore, several traditions portray Lilith as the wife of Adam, while others portray her as Satan's wife. And indeed, Zeshka, Dov's wife, is portrayed as Lilith. Like Lilith, Zeshka's domain is the night, and like her, she is pictured as an owl (p. 61). In the second version of the story Oz added two points which tie Zeshka to Lilith. Her attitude towards children (1976, p. 66-7, EE 68) resembles Lilith, whose hostility towards them is a distinctive feature. Second, her response, as she hears the lascivious wailings of the jackals, allude to the erotic licentiousness of Lilith (p. 67, EE 69).

3.1.1 The mythical nature of its characters is an essential aspect of the story. One of its central themes is the immense power of the primeval waters, which thwart every attempt to alter the forces hiding in them. The fact that the kibbutz members, the typical bearers of culture and enlightenment, embody central characteristics that tie them to primeval mythical characters solidly establishes the strength of these primordial forces. This unconquerable permanence is established by means of several other devices in the story. Words taken from the chapters of creation in the Bible lend to Dov a primeval dimension. His room is described as an "abyss": "And a black chandelier floats above the abyss" (p. 65). Oz uses here the Hebrew word 'tohu,' which appears in the opening sentences of Genesis. The same word illustrates Dov's drawings (p. 68). At night "a silent crust" is stretched on Dov's street, "and a blue mist rose up from the openings of the sewers" (p. 65). This image alludes to another description from Genesis: "But there went up a mist from the earth, and watered the whole face of the ground" (Genesis 2:6). The word "crust" points to a fermenting, feverish world, which at this moment is covered in a thin peel. In Dov's room the border between the living and the inanimate, between man and beast is completely blurred. The room is filled with a "herd of furniture bellowing with thick voices" (p. 65), the table is held up by the legs of Dinosaur and the branches of the cactus are "twisted snakes." The sentence which seals this picture—"and in the center, at an ornate desk with gold and silver fittings—the man"—portrays Dov as the core of this chaotic existence.

Dov's last words are also dedicated to the unvanquishable primitive forces of nature: "When the kibbutz was founded, Ehud, we truly set out to establish a new order, until things shrieked out that they cannot be set right. I said, there are things that man can do if he wants them with all his heart. But I did not know that there is no point in leaving a fingerprint on the water" (p. 74). In the second version of the story this issue is set out even more clearly: "When the kibbutz was founded we believed that we really could turn over a new leaf, but these things shrieked out that they cannot be set right and they should be left as they have been since the beginning of time" (p. 83, EE 89).

It becomes clear that the dark, jackal-like ocean, gave rise from its midst an illuminated island. Whereas the jackals in this story are the representatives of the dark waters, the kibbutz is the clear representative of culture. The kibbutz was founded as a framework encompassing every

sphere of man's activities. This revolutionary organization which determines for his members their daily routine, their place of work, their social functions etc., was not an end in itself, but only a starting point. This social structure was established with the hope of changing completely the Jewish nature, or human nature, altogether. The founders of the kibbutz were not satisfied with culture in its western manifestations. They sought to create human beings by the dictates of the Socialist ideals which they held: A sane and rational man, freed from instincts of greed and power; in short, a man driven by his ideals and not by his inborn natural drives. Cognizant of the revolutionary and pioneering character of their undertaking, the kibbutz members saw themselves as a "group to set the world right" (p. 64). Dov's last words expose this ambition to "set right" the primeval forces ("but things shrieked out that they cannot be set right"), only to emphasize its complete helplessness in the face of these forces. The primeval waters destroy any attempt to give shape to them or to imprint a mark on them. Herein lies the main difference between the fate of the bull and the fate of Osiris. Osiris is a cyclic story. The dead Osiris rises to life every spring. His fall is but a necessary intermediate step to victory.<sup>7</sup> In "Before His Time" this resurrection is not achieved. The slaughtered bull will not return to life nor regain his fertility. Ehud, who was "reaped" (pp. 62, 70), will not return from his grave. Jesus, contrary to Christian belief, failed completely in his mission. Mortals are as far as they always have been from salvation.

#### 4. *Towards Language and Beyond*

Commenting on the work of Berdyczewski, Oz said: "He was a 'thin' writer. . . . He did not bother to catch every nuance or to capture the flow of things. . . . His center of gravity was elsewhere" (1979, p. 31). These thoughts are well taken as they apply to the style of Oz himself. He, too, does not seek "to capture the flow of things," the continuous flow of experience, the abundance of impressions recorded in the mind from both internal and external stimuli. His center of gravity is elsewhere: not in the "flow of things" to which the modern human being is exposed, but in the tenacious permanence of the primal forces within the human psyche.

This center of gravity raised complex stylistic problems for Oz. Language is tied inseparably to consciousness.<sup>8</sup> It charts the world, recording the perceptions known to consciousness. For primal experiences which lie beyond consciousness, language does not have words.<sup>9</sup> The ineptitude of language is well reflected in "Before His Time." Thus, for example, when the protagonist tries to define the primal forces the Kibbutz founders tried to overcome, he finds only the general word "things": "When the kibbutz was founded, Ehud, we truly set out to establish a new order, but those things shrieked that they cannot be set right" (p. 74). The word "things" refers here to the primal drives which the founders of the kibbutz sought to uproot. This word reappears carrying the same meaning throughout the stories of *Where the Jackals Howl* ("Where the Jackals Howl," "A Hollow Stone," "Strange Fire," and

others). However, the word “thing” conveys a very abstract meaning that says nothing about the nature of the forces within the soul. The primeval “things” are not “sayings” (the Hebrew word Oz uses here, “davar,” means both “a thing” and “saying”) but the nameless primeval basic foundations. These “things” do not express themselves in “sayings” but in “shrieks” which cannot be phrased in words. The protagonist of the story who sketches in great detail a wild and Titanic world discovers the impotence of language in the face of this world. In attempting to compensate for this shortcoming, Oz is aided by the word “shrieked” which draws on voices and feelings beyond words and ties the above sentence to the “licentious shrieking” in Dov Sirkin’s room (p. 65). The recurring use of the word “thing” in the opening lines of the following chapter (“Like a thief some pale red thing arrived and filtered its fingers of light through the chinks in the Eastern shutter,” p. 74) also shows that the “things” are a fixed natural phenomenon.<sup>10</sup>

4.1 The recurring appearance of the word “thing” makes clear, as shown, that the word “things” refers to the eternal foundations of the human psyche. Yet, that identification does not contribute to the concretization of the essence of those things, the nature of the hidden forces, or the connections established between them. In order to express the story of those “things” Oz turned, as we have seen, to the foundations, to the struggle of Marduk and Tiamat, Osiris and Seth. To give a name to these “things,” to give them substance and to blow life into them, he had to overcome one of the most essential aspects of language. According to the concept presented in “Before His Time,” in the primeval world the forces of sin and grace, violent destructiveness and fertilizing vitality are inseparable. Language, in sharp contrast, reflects a condition of splitting, separating. Saussure strongly maintained that the signs of language are arbitrary and do not derive their meaning from essential qualities tying them to the objects they describe. Instead, their meaning is derived from the power of contrast, differentiating them from the other symbols of language. “In language there are only differences,” he concludes (1959, p. 120). At the opening of this discourse Saussure speaks of the tight bond between language and consciousness: “Psychologically our thought—apart from its expression in words—is only a shapeless and indistinct mass. Philosophers and linguists have always agreed in recognizing that without the help of signs we would be unable to make a clear-cut, consistent distinction between two ideas. Without language, thought is a vague, uncharted nebula” (pp. 111-12). Thus, language expresses a condition of splitting, of creating distinctions and setting up partitions.<sup>11</sup>

The difficulty that stood before Oz, then, can be formulated as follows: How to portray a condition of primeval unity, in which conflicting and contradicting elements battle each other and fulfill each other at the same moment, by means of language which is based on division and sharp differentiation? In order to overcome the stumbling block of language Oz turned first from the “animal in man” to the animals themselves (a bull, jackals, the vile flies, etc.). Thus he was able to aggrandize the different forces struggling within the soul of his characters

and to concretize those forces. Second, he created a world in which struggle and reconciliation go hand-in-hand, a world in which an object is described as its complete opposite, on the one hand, and on the other hand, sworn enemies are brothers in the soul. This dual structure of hostility and reconciliation is built by the story's plot, the composition of the various paragraphs, the metaphorical language, and many literary patterns that stretch through the entire story.<sup>12</sup> In order to understand how this structure is built, let us look at the first chapter of the story. It is a short chapter and I will present it here in its entirety:

The bull was warm and strong on the night of his death. In the night Samson the bull was slaughtered. Early in the morning, before the five o'clock milking, a meat trader from Nazareth came and took him away in a gray tender. Portions of his carcass were hung on rusty hooks in the butcher shops of Nazareth. The ringing of the church bells roused droves of vile flies to attack the bull's flesh, swarming upon it and exacting a green revenge.

Later, at eight o'clock in the morning, an old effendi arrived, carrying a transistor radio. He had come to buy Samson's hide. And all the while Radio Ramallah piped American music into the palm of his hand. A licentious and wild tune was cast out and the church bells accompanied it like cymbals. The tune ended—the transaction ended. The bull's hide was sold. What will you do, O Rashid Effendi, with the hide of Samson the mighty bull? Ornaments I will make of it, work of the cunning workman, souvenirs for rich lady tourists, parchment of variegated pictures: here is the alleyway where Jesus lived, here is the carpenter's workshop, Joseph in the middle, here angels are striking bells to proclaim the birth of the Saviour, and here is the Babe himself, his forehead shining light. Everything parchment work, the acme of art.

Rashid Effendi went to Zaim's cafe to spend the morning at the backgammon table. In his right hand the radio with its cheerful music, and in his sack is packed a bundle of a steaming hide.

A Nazarene wind, heavy with smells, plucked at the bell-clappers and the cypress treetop, stirring the hooks in the butcher shops, and the flesh of the bull gave out a crimson shriek (p. 59).

The compositional principle, on the surface, is a linear chronological one: "In the night, Samson the bull was slaughtered. Early in the morning . . . a meat trader from Nazareth came. . . . Later, at eight o'clock in the morning, an old effendi arrived. . . ." Yet, this linear structure conceals a complex structure of confrontations and conciliations.

The first paragraph creates a drastic contrast between the vile flies and the bull: the flies swarm upon him to exact revenge. We have seen previously, that the symbolic meaning of the bull and the flies conjures up primeval struggles between God and Satan, between Osiris and Jesus and their enemies. This confrontation spreads its shadow over the entire chapter. In the following chapters this struggle is concretized in the hostility between bull and jackal, in the war between Israel and her Arab neighbors, and more. And yet, in this short chapter language not only creates a strong confrontation but also signs a peace treaty between the conflicting parties.



The beginning of the paragraph describes the effendi coming to buy the bull's hide. The tune heard from the radio in his hand is depicted as "wild and licentious," adjectives that would characterize the jackals later in the story. Thus, this tune is, apparently, the complete opposite of the church bells. Surprisingly, a complete harmony exists between the two. The church bells, whose task is to call the believers and to strengthen their belief, merge with the licentious tune as a festive accompaniment: "A licentious and wild tune was cast out and the church bells accompanied it like cymbals." This relationship might draw the reader's attention to the fact that already in the first paragraph of the story the church bells awaken not the church believers but rather the vile flies, which then swarm upon the bull's flesh and take their revenge on it. The bitter antagonism between the bull and the vile flies develops in the end of the story into the conflict between the "obscenely riotous jackals" and the festive message of the church bells (p. 74). However, in the first paragraphs of the story the measured sound of the bells blend in thoroughly with the dissolute and wild tune, and even awakens the vile flies to take revenge on the bull. To use a term parallel to the details of the story, the author establishes here a musical "chord": instead of playing one note from one string he creates a chord encompassing several strings.<sup>13</sup> By ways of opposition and conciliation the chord ties details from different or even contradicting areas, and his meaning is built through the connection that language creates between its several references.

The rivalry between the bull and the flies precedes the struggle between Jews and Arabs. Indeed, the bull has lost his fertility after being bitten by a jackal and Arabs from Nazareth gain his flesh and hide. Yet, along with this confrontation transactions are made between the rival parties. A meat trader from Nazareth buys the bull's flesh, and the transaction concerning his hide is carried on against the background of the mutual sound of the radio and the church bells: "The tune ended—the transaction ended." Moreover, the kibbutz's bull is about to feed the Arab inhabitants of Nazareth, and its hide will be used for Christian ornaments.

In this system of confrontations and conciliations the church plays an important role. On the one hand, the church is supposed to be the representative of culture, the diametric opposition of the vile flies, the jackals and the licentious voices. Indeed, that is how the narrator describes it in the final paragraph of the story. On the other hand, the church belongs to the Arab side, which is paralleled in this story to the jackals. Thus the church, like Dov Sirkin, belongs to both worlds. This phenomenon explains, among other things, the affinity between the church bells, the flies and the wild tune.

It is easy to see that this technique is employed throughout the chapter. Each item presented in it is reciprocally connected with another item: the transaction of the bull's hide is conducted against the background of the sounds of the radio and the church bells; Rashid Effendi sits in the cafe, holding in his right hand the radio and at his feet the hide of the dead bull; and a Nazarene breeze plucks at the churches'

bells, the cypress' treetops and the bull's flesh in the butcher shops. The metonymical passages from one item to another, which create these catalogues, conceal a complicated system of contradictions and conciliations. Thus, the main thematic principle of the first chapter consists of two phases: first, the creation of an acute confrontation; and second, the establishment of "chords" that tie together the combatting parties or their metaphoric representatives. The struggle that at first sight seems insolvable is accompanied by clandestine reconciliation.

4.2 The first chapter of "Before His Time" is a thematic overture to the story and, in general, to all of Oz's work. It presents a world whose axis is a primeval struggle between mortal enemies. This primal conflict is accompanied by a series of devices which, paradoxically, reveal the kinship between the warring camps. These devices consist, in the complete story, of polyphonic connections (Dov Sirkin is paralled both to a bull and to a jackal), different "chords," and metaphorical language which bestows human qualities to animals and animal qualities to people. These devices reveal that the external struggle covers a completely different struggle, the struggle of each side against itself. The partition which stands in the world does not separate God and Satan, heaven and earth, but exists within the battling forces themselves. Indeed, in the final chapter of the story it becomes clear that man and jackal are one, that man is his own mortal enemy. This conclusion clearly demonstrates that the overt struggle can never end in victory. The side which forever vanquishes its enemy will irreparably wound sources of vitality and power that lie latent within himself.

### 5. *Man Against Himself*

The dual structure of conflict and conciliation enabled Oz to distinguish the battling forces, to concretize their power and their nature, and, at the same time, to merge them into a single unitary existence. In this manner, Oz overcame the fact that language slices and scatters the complexity of existence and presents the foundations of existence only in abstract and vague terms. These generalizations demand further elaboration.

5.1 "An eternal curse is cast between house dwellers and those who live in mountains and ravines. Sometimes, during the night, a plump house dog hears the voice of his cursed brother. The sound does not come from across the fields. The dog's enemy dwells within. From the depths it sends out volleys of greenish laughter" (p. 73). These sentences convey in a condensed and crystallized form the worldview immersed in the story. True, the narrator says, there is progress in history, and a wild animal may undergo a slow metamorphosis and become domesticated. Yet, the law of conservation of energy still reigns in nature. The primal forces do not vanish. In new guise they sometimes reappear exerting their ancient power. This passage shifts the focus from the surface of the conflict to its roots. Oz recedes from the present into the dawn of history, only to return and portray the present from a new vantage point. It

transpires that the dog is but the younger brother of the jackal. That is, along with an eternal enmity which exist between them, they also share a common blood whose strength stands unmatched. Moreover, the cursed mountain dweller is also the plump house dweller himself, for he continues to live in the “depths” of the tamed dog. On the other hand, it becomes evident from this description that the dog is his own enemy, “an eternal curse is cast between” him and himself. As I argued above, this is a central theme in the story and in all of Oz’s work. An object is its own polar opposite.

5.1.1 The main domain where this condition is reflected is, of course, in the human domain. The author emphasizes this fact, among other things, by depicting Dov Sirkin as “house dweller” (pp. 64, 71) in a parallel to the dog who was labelled “house dweller” and “house dog.” No doubt, Dov concretizes the contradiction embedded in the human condition: he is Dov (a bear in Hebrew) and a man, a tamed bull and a jackal, the foe of the bull.

The contradiction which opens the story, between the bull and the filthy flies, turns to a confrontation between bull and jackal. The jackal dies in this struggle, but he strikes at the fertility of the bull, leading him to death: “A stray jackal had broken into the cattle shed and had bitten Samson in the leg. Samson killed him with a kick, but that bite killed the bull’s potency” (p. 60). As is characteristic of the author’s worldview, Dov is paralleled to both the bull and the jackal, the bitter rivals. Both Dov and the bull are “at the height of their potency” (pp. 59, 67), and both now suffer from an unseen malady which brings an untimely death upon them. Both are resting at night with head bowed (pp. 60, 65), and both, tiring of struggle, receive the “spasm” of death with a blessing (“Finally the spasm came, and shook the bull’s body,” p. 61; “Finally the spasm came, soft and compassionate,” p. 74). The bull represents a primeval power that was tamed and locked behind bars. The contradiction in his being brings upon his end. Not incidentally does the jackal destroy the source of the bull’s vitality and power, his fertility. His castration by the jackal only concretizes the contradictory nature of his life.<sup>14</sup> The bull sheds light on the forces hidden within Dov, as well as on the contradiction submerged in his existence: the need to channel the mighty energy throbbing within him into a social framework, restrained and bridled. Another facet of this contradiction is the fact that the powerful and generative forces residing in him comprehend base and evil drives as well. Thus, Dov Sirkin, who is paralleled to Samson the bull, is also analogous to the jackals, the bull’s killers.

The “lewd rejoicing voices” of the jackals (p. 64) bring to mind Dov’s “rejoicing voice” (p. 63) and the signs of “licentiousness” in his room (p. 65). The “disordered” sounds of the jackals (p. 64. Heb.: “i’rbuvya”) is similar to the “disorder” which marks Dov’s room (p. 65. Heb.: “maa’rbolet”). This room, like the world of the jackals (p. 64), reflects an ancient existence, chaotic and unchanging. Thus, the evil and baseness, the lewdness and impurity which the story attributes to the jackals can be ascribed to Dov Sirkin as well. Given this analogy it is clear why Dov’s

war against the jackals is doomed to failure. As mentioned, while still on the kibbutz, Dov conducted a persistent battle against the jackals (p. 62). With his “jackal” side exposed, it becomes evident that in fighting against the jackals Dov was fighting against himself, like the dog whose foe dwells under his skin. Dov took part in an ideological movement that set itself the goal of changing human nature through a return to nature and working the land. The return to nature matched Dov’s character perfectly, but it also brought along with it the lofty ambition to “establish a new order,” to restrain the primeval drives in the soul and to force upon them sanity, reason, and balance. The return to nature awakens hidden powers in Dov (see for example the description of his work in the orchards, p. 63). But along with returning to nature Dov unknowingly fights against nature (in the form of the jackals), against himself. Thus, at the final scene of the story Dov admits that the kibbutz put forth an unattainable goal, and that the war he declared against the jackals was doomed: the jackals are flesh of his own flesh.

By means of externalizing the forces operating in Dov and illustrating them as animals, Oz achieved several principle objectives. First, he enhanced the forces swirling within his protagonist and accentuated their unchanging, primal nature. The bull is “a mighty bull” (p. 59), “strong and ancient” (p. 74). The jackals also “follow the lead of their fathers, and nothing is changed” (p. 64). Second, he singled out the different powers and concretized them. The bull, a traditional symbol of the sun’s light, represents a tremendous power that was restrained and joined the life within the fence. The jackal, in contrast, is the agent of darkness. He is impure, lewd and evil; though, as the representative of the primeval waters, the jackal has, as we shall see later, other sides as well. The detailed descriptions of the animals shift the story from the allegorical mode to the symbolic. The reader can feel the heat of the bull’s breath and blood, see his legs kicking at the proppings, or his tail lashing at his muddy buttocks (p. 60). His death is conveyed through a realistic detailing, precise and accurate. The description of the jackals is even more detailed (pp. 62, 64, 73, and more).

The third objective is the most interesting one: aggrandizing these forces and concretizing them in order to achieve their unity in Dov’s character, in which elements of the bull and the jackal coexist. Dov is portrayed as a mighty and powerful character in which Apollinian and Dionysian elements, sanity and insanity, vie against each other. His soul is an arena for a primeval struggle between God and Satan. He belongs to the “illuminated island” of the kibbutz, yet one of his feet is beyond the fence, in the midst of the darkness and the jackals. In Jerusalem he earns his livelihood by writing “intricate articles full of complicated tables” for scientific magazines. But his detailed drawings, with their precise calculations, sketch a chaotic world powered by desires and drives. With the polyphonic formation of his protagonist, Oz overcame the two aforementioned limitations of language: first, that language represents the primeval origins of the soul only in a sketchy, general, and abstract manner; second, that language slices and scatters the fullness of existence, and thus contradicts the fundamental structure of nature in

which sin and holiness, sanity and madness struggle and reconcile simultaneously. Oz turned the splitting and slicing nature of language into a source of strength: different descriptions taken from the different parts of the story are united together in order to encircle something which none could encompass alone. In order to give name and substance to the precultural “things,” Oz wove the words together like thin fibers interwoven to create a strong rope.<sup>15</sup>

5.2 The polyphonic structure is not the only factor in the story which binds the quarrelling sides. The technique of forming “chords,” described previously, is another device which sheds light on the close kinship that exists between the antagonists. This technique appears several times through the course of the story (pp. 61, 62, 64, 65, and more), reaching a climax in the last paragraph of the story as it reverses the contrast between the melody of the bells and the wailing of the jackals to a metaphorical identification. The final paragraph opens by emphasizing the “festiveness” of the monastery’s bells, which is answered by the “savage and irreverent” twisted laughter of the jackals. Yet, the bells’ festiveness ties them with the “festive” behavior of the jackals described on the previous page (p. 73). Furthermore, the jackals are explicitly likened in this picture to “priests,” a term taken directly from the world of churches and monasteries.

One of the interesting methods of establishing the chords is a textual shift from one detail to another which is in no other way connected. In this case, the juxtaposition creates an implicit connection between the otherwise disconnected details. A characteristic example of this device is the transition from, “In those days Dov was lord of the orchard” to “The old father of Samson the bull ruled the barns in those days. Generations of jackals have passed away since then” (p. 64). The very catalogue-like nature of the description hints to the connection between its parts. This connection is highlighted by the hierarchical phrasing (Dov is the “lord of the orchard,” the bull “ruled the barns”) and by the numerous parallels that tie Dov to the bull and the jackals. Similar shifts link Ehud to the jackals (pp. 65, 73).

A further device which blurs the division between the antagonists is the numerous anthropomorphisms included in the story. These anthropomorphisms, constructed by the use of metaphor and simile, are but another aspect of a kinship which the story creates between man and the animals. Indeed, from the comparison of human being to animals the opposite course is induced as well, and Oz concretizes this hidden implication again and again. Already in the first paragraph the flies are portrayed as having human qualities, and later the cries of the jackals are described as crying, laughter, and lamentation. The wailing of a lone jackal is compared to a violinist tuning his chord and the chords of his friends (p. 65). In other descriptions the jackals are described as driven by malice, evil, hate, and even grief (p. 68). The jackals approaching the body of Ehud are like “festive priests in ceremony of mourning” (p. 73). On the surface the story sets up a bitter struggle between man and jackal: the kibbutz fence is like a “fortress” (p. 73) protected from its enemy.

And yet, a ramified metaphorical net portrays man as jackal and the jackals as human beings, blurring completely the border between the warring camps.

5.3 This complex situation in which the conflict existing between the antagonists is accompanied by a rich array of devices that point to a proximity and the possibility of a reciprocal bond between the rival parties characterizes all of Oz's works.<sup>16</sup> From it a two-faceted dialectical situation is implied. First, in the conflict between darkness and light, between the primeval waters and the land, the sides are not composed of merely one element. The waters contain not only destructive forces, but a fertilizing power as well. In the world of darkness, the world of the jackals, there is malice and wildness but holiness as well.<sup>17</sup> Second, the world of dark depths is not just the sworn enemy of the illuminated world, for it is also the source of that world, nourishing it as the roots of the tree nourish its highest branch (this simile appears later in Oz's works, see "Strange Fire," 1965, and more). The total defeat which falls upon the representatives of culture in "Before His Time" derives from their denial of this situation, from their perception of the relationship between man and jackal as a solely antagonistic one. According to their outlook, a linear evolution exists in nature, whose pinnacle is man-culture-consciousness. On man falls the task of fighting with all his strength so as to safeguard the attainment of this evolution and consolidate it. On human beings falls the task of protecting themselves from the dark forces burrowing underneath them and attempting to eradicate them from the universe. And thus, the kibbutz fences itself in from the jackals and darkness; Dov battles against the jackals and Ehud against the Arabs. This war is doomed to failure from its inception, for they struggle with a primeval foe, firm and unvanquishable. Furthermore, the dualistic character of the battling sides reveals that their war is a war against themselves. Even if it were in their power to win, in doing so they would cut themselves off from sources of their vitality and creativity and bring upon their own annihilation. In his later works Oz emphasizes over and over the folly of attempting to uproot the primeval forces from the world, the necessity of people to expose themselves to them and to be nurtured from the power and sagacity stored within them. In other words, the conception of evolution as a pyramid in which man-culture are the pinnacle is an oversimplified and misleading conception. The upward progression to the summit implies a distancing from the base, from the origins, in which man is one with nature and with the abundance of life within him. Disregarding this condition, wishing to "set right" the world through ideological or religious movements, brings about the downfall of the representatives of culture (the kibbutz members, the monks).

## 6. Conclusion

As mentioned, not incidentally was "Before His Time" the first of the stories which Oz later included in *Where the Jackals Howl*. Several of the components of this story become foundation stones in Oz's later works. Among these it is worthwhile to note the following:

1. The basic foundations of the soul, the manner in which they are exposed and the possible connections among them, stand in the center of Oz's works. The vigorous effort to uncover these foundations creates a dual structure in Oz's stories. First, an inclination towards stories of creation, towards myth. Second, finding a modern reality that will concretize these essential foundations. The modern world set forth in Oz's works, on one hand, obscures primeval processes, yet, on the other hand, resurrects them through a rich array of symbols. The bull and the flies, the bear, the jackal and the owl, the water, the gold and the silver, the lead and the copper, recall the stories of Marduk and Tiamat, Osiris, Jesus, Lilith, the alchemists search for gold, and more. This phenomenon reappears again and again in Oz's later works. Thus, for example, Noga Berger, the protagonist of *Elsewhere, Perhaps* (1966) follows the figures of Aphrodite—Venus (her name is the Hebrew name of the star Venus, p. 344) and The Virgin Mary (by means of her pet name Stella-Marris, the pomegranate she sings about, and more). Rimona, one of the main characters of *A Perfect Peace* (1982) is portrayed as Persephone ("Rimon" is Hebrew for pomegranate, the most prominent symbol of Persephone; she has contacts with the spirits of the dead, and more) and Mary (the cyclamen and the almond, which are connected to her figure, are common symbols of Mary). The significance which the alchemists attached to mercury indicates that Yonatan Lifshitz, who sees the moonlight as mercury during his frightening night journey to Petra, reaches in this journey the primeval substance of his soul (*A Perfect Peace*).<sup>18</sup>

Oz conceives of the primeval forces within the soul as concrete entities, forces which have existed in the world since its very beginning. These forces inhabit his world as archetypes or Platonic forms. He does not always take pains to recreate them. Often he is content with merely pointing these forces out, assuming that they are as meaningful in the reader's world as they are in his own.

2. The extent to which the primal forces are concretized varies. In the case of minor characters Oz makes due with creating a parallel between his character and some mythical figure, using one or two symbols characteristic of this mythical figure to establish the connection. The core of the story revolves around the concretization of the forces within the protagonists. This concretization is achieved, as seen previously, by means of a dual structure of conflict and conciliation. This structure sets, as its basis, a sharp conflict between diametrically opposed forces, whose nature is realized through different details from the characters' world.

The conflict contains three main facets which are interrelated. First, in the course of the work it becomes apparent that each of the battling forces is not homogenous. And thus, if on the surface an unrelenting war is being waged between these two enemies, then implicit in the story is their possible resemblance and mutual attraction. For example, in the novel *Elsewhere, Perhaps* a persistent struggle is held between Israel and her Arab neighbors. The narrator who adopts, among other things, the stand of the kibbutz members, portrays this struggle as

a conflict between light-culture-man and darkness-nature-woman. However, a careful reading of the novel reveals that within each of the antagonists are contained elements of its enemy, and implicitly they are described as a man and a woman ready to make love.

From these two aspects is derived a complete blurring of any dichotomous notion: heaven and earth, culture and nature, male and female, etc. These three trends create a world in which, on the one hand, an element is its own contradiction, and on the other hand, an element is transformed into the element which is in opposition to it.<sup>19</sup> This world is one in which suffering is pleasure and pleasure is suffering, a world in which an attraction to life is an attraction to death, and yearning for death is a strong yearning for life. The Arab in Oz's works is the enemy and the fertilizing phallus (*Elsewhere, Perhaps, A Perfect Peace*, and more), and redemption in this world is achieved only through a descent to the underworld (*A Perfect Peace*). This is a fluid world, whose elements reject any fixed labels. This world repels any value-oriented division between "good" and "evil," "righteousness" and "corruption." Oz, as stated, does not seek to "capture the flow of things with words." His main interest lies in the permanent foundations of the soul and of the world. This experiential world is characterized by opposites and contradictions and by a reciprocating exchange between its parts. The textual structure, in which a dual structure of opposition and conciliation that defies any possibility of bestowing a fixed label to its parts is established, parallels in its character the world reflected through it—a world in which all elements are mobile, flowing and changing.

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## NOTES

1. The stories of *Where the Jackals Howl* were rewritten by the author (Am Oved edition, 1976). The present discussion deals with the first version of "Before His Time" (1965). The new version is mentioned in several cases in order to illuminate some of the arguments. The quotations from this version are in accord with the English edition of the book (1981). References to the English edition are marked EE.
2. This topic is dealt with in detail in the chapter "Amos Oz—An Introductory essay" in Balaban's *Between God and Beast, An Examination of the Prose of Amos Oz* (1986).
3. These unknown stories by Oz are contained in the appendix to *Between God and Beast*. A detailed examination of them is included in chapter two of the book.
4. This topic is elaborated in the chapter "Water and Sky" in *Between God and Beast*. The ocean is one of the main symbols dealt with by Jung. Oz's debt to Jung is amply discussed in the above research.
5. Oz is quite familiar with Egyptian myth. In a letter dated June 12, 1984, he wrote to me about his trip to Egypt, where he "finally became acquainted from up close with some of the protagonists of the stories of my youth (the cows-goddess Hathor, the gods Isis and Osiris, and Seth,



the murderer of his brother, and Horus—the avenger of his father, and the jackal god Anubis, who is in charge of mummification).”

6. The adjectives “green”—“greenish” ties these spheres. Just as the flies exact a “green” revenge, so does the jackal that resides within the dog send out from his depths “volleys of greenish laughter” (p. 73).
7. On the four stages of this myth and their interrelation see Frye (1971, p. 192).
8. On this topic see, among others, the thoughts of Saussure brought out later in the chapter. The connection between culture, thought and language has been amply discussed. Descartes argued that animals do not think, since they do not speak (1970, 245). For a detailed discussion of Descartes’s attitude see Malcolm, 1977. Frege, whose theory has established the framework for the modern examinations of the reciprocal affinity between language, meaning and thought, accepted Descartes’s assumptions on this point (1980). Davidson rejects Descartes’s idea concerning the connection between language and thought, but he shares his opinion that animals do not think (1984).

Oz touched upon the above connection more than once in his articles: “I hope that the written literature can slowly by slowly enrich the spoken language. In the final analysis the borders of language are the borders of your world and that which you cannot express in words you cannot grasp well in thought either. The chance to express complexity and subtlety is the chance to enrich life and live it by a subtle and complex rhythm. The restriction of speech is one of the primary foundations of rudeness and general unbothering blazeness” (1979, p. 28). This is typical Wittgenstein phrasing (compare: “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world,” 1922, p. 149). But this is a similarity of phrasing only. According to Wittgenstein language cannot be enriched.

9. In many of his books Jung expresses the idea that this world of the unconscious, which language has no way of describing, can only be expressed by means of symbols (see 1959, p. 6; 1966, p. 70, and more).
10. Indeed, in the second version of the story the word “thing” was replaced by the word “force” (p. 83, EE p. 89).
11. The idea that consciousness is a dividing and splitting element has been accepted in Western philosophy since Kant. Levi-Strauss and his disciples added to this notion the assertion that consciousness not only separates and splits up its objects, but also receives them, according to its nature, in oppositions.

Oz touches on this issue in his *Touch the Water, Touch the Wind*, in the writings of the dying, hallucinating Ernst Cohen: “Music, therefore, is melodic mathematics, and whoever has the key is able (in principle) to transform matter into energy, energy into suffering, suffering into time, time into will, will into space, everything into everything else in any order whatever, as everything truly is before the mind breaks it down into different elements, some of which are completely distinct from others” (1973, p. 169, EE 1973, p. 160).

12. Nurit Gertz stresses the structure of opposites which typifies Oz’s works (1980, p. 55). “The structure of oppositions” is utilized by her for description and interpretation of all Oz’s works (see Chapter 3 of her book). The possible synthesis between the antagonists is not discussed by her at all.
13. The verb “cast” which describes the tune here, reappears later in the story: “An eternal curse is cast between house dwellers and those who live in mountains and ravines” (p. 73). This recurrence strengthens the tie between the sounds of the radio and the bells and the central conflict of the story.

14. The leg is a common phallic symbol. See de Vries, 1981, p. 294, and Cooper, 1984, p. 96.
15. The polyphonic technique as a typifying feature of Dostoevsky's work was amply dealt with by Bakhtin (1984). Oz made highly complicated use of this technique in the novel *A Perfect Peace*. An intricate net of analogies connects all the main characters in this novel, alluding to the "perfect peace" they all reach in the final chapters. (See *Between God and Beast*.)
16. This topic is elaborated in the chapter "War and Peace" in *Between God and Beast*.
17. As noted, the jackals in the story are compared to priests and to monks. One may add that Anubis, the jackal god, helped Isis to gather the pieces of Osiris' flesh, and traditionally he plays the role of Jesus, that of the psychopomp (de Vries, p. 275).
18. This symbolism is dealt with in detail in *Between God and Beast*.
19. Compare this description to the manner in which Barbara Johnson characterizes the analyses of the works brought out in her book: "Reading, here, proceeds by identifying and dismantling differences by means of other differences that cannot be fully identified or dismantled. The starting point is often a binary difference that is subsequently shown to be an allusion created by the workings of differences much harder to pin down. The differences between entities (prose and poetry, man and woman, literature and theory, guilt and innocence) are shown to be based on a repression of differences within entities, ways in which an entity differs from itself. The 'deconstruction' of a binary opposition is thus not an annihilation of all values or differences; it is an attempt to follow the subtle, powerful effects of differences already at work within the illusion of a binary opposition" (1985, pp. x-xi).

There is an interesting similarity between Oz's concepts of language and the theory of Derrida (the 'erasure,' the rejection of hierarchical oppositions, and more), despite their diametrically opposed points of departure. A cornerstone of Derrida's thought is the complete rejection of the possible existence of an origin. This rejection leads to his conception of "writing," of "differance," etc. (See, for example, *Of Grammatology*, 1980.) In contrast, in Oz's work, based on Jungian concepts, the origin is conceived as a concrete and valid entity. Language "erases" itself in Oz's work due to the contradiction between its character and the nature of this origin, its complexity and the inner flow which characterizes it.

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\*Amos Oz's works that are marked with an asterisk exist in Hebrew only. Translations of the quotations from these works have been done by me, A. B.

## CALL FOR PANELISTS

Stuart Peterfreund, Chair-Designate of the CELJ session at the 1991 NEMLA meeting, is seeking panelists for that session, to be devoted to the question "What Makes a Journal (or Editor) an Award-Winner?" Peterfreund is particularly interested to include on the panel editors of journals that have won CELJ awards during the past several years and/or those who served on the panels that judged for and conferred those awards. Anyone interested in serving on the panel should contact Peterfreund at the following address: Department of English, Northeastern University, 360 Huntington Avenue, Boston, MA 02115.