

## **The Stature of the Writer in Society**

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I must admit that it is difficult for me to relate to the articles of Amos Oz within the context of a dry professor's lecture. That is because these articles have great personal significance for me, as for many others of my generation. During the Sixties and the Seventies, and especially between the Six Day War and the Yom Kippur War, Oz's writings helped us "find ourselves." His articles gave perfect, envy-producing expression to the inarticulate whispers in our hearts and even when they expressed opinions that occasionally angered us, they always challenged us.

So, I am personally involved; I feel a great spiritual identification with Amos Oz. I am grateful that he served as public spokesman for myself and those of my sort, and I admire the way he was able to articulate what we were thinking. However, despite my partiality, I still feel that I am capable of characterizing some elements of his political journalism in a way that is not totally subjective. I want to focus on one single topic: the clear-headed, lucid manner with which Amos Oz relates to political journalistic commentaries and his keen awareness of the problematic nature of what we can call "the stature of the man of letters in a democratic society." It is a pity that so many of Oz's critics do not possess his lucidity and awareness.

I will touch upon issues of Oz's social commitment only tangentially. Even though these matters are important to me as well, they have been central to public discourse in the past and will continue to be so for a long time to come. Amos Oz left an important, deep mark on the Israeli culture because he dealt with essential questions of our existence with great talent, understanding and sensitivity. He is one of the few people of whom we can say unequivocally: Israeli culture would not be the same without him. But there are certain problems intrinsic to the involvement of the writer in a modern democracy, and this is the topic upon which I will elaborate.

Many of Amos Oz's essays are adapted from his discussions, interviews and

lectures. Oz generally expresses his point of view with moderation and restraint, and sometimes even employs the familiar tone of a man who carries on a conversation among friends. At the same time, he retains a keenness and clarity that despises ambiguity. Naturally, this style aroused the ire of his political opponents but strangely enough, his style evoked not a small measure of criticism from what can be regarded as his own political camp. It is even more peculiar that a large portion of these grievances are the direct result of Oz's talents: he is said to be too fluent, too polished, too successful at expressing his ideas in a way that becomes indelibly engraved in our memories. It is as if there is an a priori rule that the author of essays should be inarticulate! But anyone who has actually **read** Oz's essays and not just professes expertise about them from third-party hearsay, can easily see that they are written in regular modern Hebrew: clear, lucid, simple and devoid of floridity. Amos Oz clearly knows Hebrew well and employs many linguistic registers in his political commentaries, from Biblical Hebrew to Mishnaic and Modern Hebrew. In addition, his articles resonate with traces of Hebrew literature throughout the generations and especially of poets and singers that are dear to his heart. Anyone who has read Oz's prose knows that he has made a conscious effort in the articles to limit his language to about ten percent of the Hebrew at his disposal. So why, the pique and resentment of the critics?

In my opinion, the richness of language in Oz's stories, the linguistic expertise of the major protagonists and the pseudo-poetic rhetoric of the narrator create a difficult problem. Most of his stories are written according to the conventions of the realistic novel, and sometimes it seems that Oz finds it difficult to portray simple characters, characters without education, characters that are inarticulate or incoherent. Characters like these, and frequently even the narrator himself, sometimes sound as if the author has put words in their mouths, words that they would not be capable of uttering without the author's help. Therefore it seems to me that when Amos Oz employs his formidable mimetic powers as a realist, he reaches his prime when he fashions characters whose eloquence and extraordinary power of self-expression are grounded in the profession, status, life history or special circumstances which are thrust upon them. These include characters such as the narrator in the story "Late Love" or Azaria Gittlin in the novel "A Perfect Peace." I believe that this factor partially explains Oz's attraction to this sort of character. The richness of the language occasionally trips up the author who is trying to express himself in prosaic terms and according to the conventions of the realistic story. However, it does not pose a problem for Amos

Oz the essayist. In fact, Oz's stylistic restraint in his four collections of essays sometimes creates a writing style that is almost ascetic.[\[1\]](#) It seems to me that adjectives like "florid" and "grandiose" are assigned to Oz, mainly by those who have not actually read his writings. They attribute negative qualities to him by mere rumor (if not outright slander or jealousy) because of their innate suspicion of all kinds of elitist groups, and these critics arise not only from what is termed the "Right" but even from what is called the "Left." This suspicion is fed by those who identify themselves as "marginalists" and who mistakenly believe that Amos Oz addresses his readers from some high platform embodying the essence of Judaism, Zionism or Israelism. To these critics, it seems that Oz's words are backed up by an extra-literary force that that they do not share. And so all kinds of battles, suspicions and jealousies find their way to him. In a democracy we are all equal, therefore there is nothing easier than mocking the citizen who seems to speak in the name of the collective or human spirit. Just as in ancient times the simple folk vented their anger against the wise man, today the common folk who are imbued with the consciousness of democratic equality ask the writer: Who put you up to this? Who appointed you to lecture us and be our guide?

Aside from the querulousness and envy that frequently made their way into interchanges with Amos Oz, we face a real problem. The concept of the human spirit, a specific construct of German idealistic philosophy that reached its pinnacle of influence during the Romantic era, is not held in high esteem in our own day. Many contemporary thinkers—and not inferior ones—question the very existence of the human spirit as a common denominator that unifies all human beings, at least in the deep structure of their values and judgments. Others, who do accept the concept of the spirit, do not hold that artists, poets, and authors are its proper spokesmen. It seems to me that Amos Oz himself has misgivings about this authority of the human spirit, of the special mandate of the man of letters. He never kowtowed to everything that the major authors and poets said outside of their stories or poems, and often emphasized—with complete justice, in my opinion—that the characteristics that made them into great artists did not necessarily enable them to become reliable social and political guides.

Perhaps the very opposite is true: one of his excellent early essays made a clear delineation between Uri Zvi Greenberg's authority as a prodigious poet, and his questionable authority as a social-political guide of the nation. Oz attributed to Greenberg the tendency to see the State of Israel as a tremendous act of Jewish retaliation against all hostile Gentiles throughout the generations. Oz pointed to the dangerous and warped elements of this viewpoint. Many of us who fought in

the Six Day War asked ourselves: what special authority was given to great writers such as Agnon and Hazaz or an exquisite poet such as Alterman, to speak in the name of "the nation's past and its future" when they established the Movement for Greater Israel? But please pay attention: We are not talking here about the democratic right to express an opinion to which men of letters are entitled to, as are all citizens. We are talking about the belief that writers and poets enjoy special privilege and super-authority in discussing public matters. The belief that the writer, poet, or artists in general, are closer than others to the secrets of existence and thus understand better what courses of action should be taken under any given set of circumstances, is a relic of the Romantic movement. In the complex reality of contemporary society such a belief seems to many, myself included, mere superstition and illusion.

Amos Oz's good judgment led him to clearly distinguish between the qualities necessary for a work of art, and those necessary for social and political leadership. [2] In his own work he is careful to distinguish between artistic literary works of fiction, and essays with social or political commentary. In fact, he was criticized for this dichotomy. (Calderon, 1980: S2 and on in the Hebrew.) In his own political commentaries he was always careful to speak only on behalf of himself, as a concerned citizen, or at most as the inheritor of a specific tradition of the Labor movement, but never in the name of the "human spirit." Yet all this did not help him. To his opponents he always appeared as one who spoke from "on high," from the authority of the human spirit, thus reaping double grievances. On the one hand he aroused the anger of all those who despise elitist arrogance, who seek equality even in domains where equality never can exist, and they ask him: Who put you up to this? For whom do you speak? The very vigilance that accompanied Oz's writings aroused their ire. Why didn't people listen to them as they listened to Amos Oz?

On the other side there are those critics, like Dan Meron, a respected professor and historian of Modern Hebrew literature, who criticized Oz for not maintaining the purity of the human spirit and instead, acting like Everyman. In an interesting and comprehensive essay on the history of the relations between the literary and political elite in the Zionist movement and the State, Meron cites as a low point the period when writers did not guide the men of action but instead, "the author scampers around in a disrespectful manner between the political salons of diplomats and high-level military personages, and those of marginal oppositional groups (Meron, 1985 Hebrew:127). [3] What is, in essence, this "disrespectful manner"? If a well-known author finds that an oppositional fringe group

expresses his values and preferences in a specified time period, and at the same time he wants to be included in the discussions of diplomats and military figures regarding the dilemmas that they face—what can be improper about that? Setting aside the implicit assumption that Meron feels it should be beneath the honor of authors to curry favor or seek the company of diplomats and military commanders, Meron's reference to "manner" raises a wider philosophical issue regarding the proper relations between men of letters and men and of action.

Meron's critique assumes that if an intellectual forms an opinion on a public issue, he must do it in a particular way, specifically in the company of other writers and thinkers, as befits a representative of the "human spirit." Underlying this assumption is the belief that authors possess special sensitivities that should be expressed in their social and political commitments. Suppose, for example, that an author forms an opinion on whether Israel was really required to practice restraint as requested by the Americans during the Gulf War, when scud missiles fell on Tel Aviv, or whether Israel should have launched an attack against the Iraqi army. According to the premise above, this author should form an opinion together with other professional colleagues who will advise him regarding how to relate to the issue from the point of view of pure spirit. He ought to coordinate his actions only with his fellow writers and partners in inspiration, because any other activity would lead to self-debasement. He should certainly not sully his mission by exchanging words with men of action like generals and diplomats.

It is strange that similar viewpoint would be taken by a researcher who provided a meticulous and precise analysis of the manifesto that founded the Movement for Greater Israel. Meron maintains that the most important writers of the previous generation subscribed to the Manifesto, and complains (and with great justice) that the unrestrained theosophy of this manifesto does not take into consideration those factors that people with a sense of reality are obliged to consider (Meron, 1991: p. 339 and on). When we discuss matters which require a sense of reality, why should we assume that proper considerations will arise only from the "spirit" — a source of exclusive inspiration reserved for authors, poets and literary historians — rather than as the result of the rational balancing of probable chances versus probable risks that men of action employ?

Just as the proverbial Jew was attacked by the anti-Semite for being a weakling and a parasite, while also being attacked for employing the powerful, hidden strengths of his race against non-Jews, so Amos Oz has been attacked twice: first for speaking from "on high" in the name of the human spirit, dealing with topics about which the writer has no advantage over other citizens; then a second time

for conferring with men of action, thus sully the purity of literature with the dubious fellowship of those who do not have a share in that exclusive club of the representatives of spirit. Can't Oz's actions be understood as a means of balancing his role as a man of letters in a democratic society? Just as he denies the prophetic powers of social and political leadership to authors and poets like himself, he forces himself to speak as an equal among equals with all other citizens who are faced with the same social and political dilemmas.

While I have no doubt that Oz's readers imagined association of him with the "man of spirit" is the result of the illusion of the stylistic elevation in his writings, I also have no doubt that this image is based on error. As I mentioned above, Oz has always spoken either on behalf of himself, at most as the inheritor of specific traditions of Hebrew literature, or of the Labor movement. Anyone who has eagerly followed Oz's various polemics as I have, even if sometimes with differences of opinion, knows that as a result of these polemics, Amos Oz has finally been recognized for what he actually was from the start: "a very unique individual." Far from being a sort of spokesman for the collective human spirit, although one who ultimately can only speak on behalf of himself, Amos Oz is, in fact, an actor occupying a stage on which only one person stands.

To understand Oz's singularity we must review some of Oz's battles. He had to fight against religious Orthodoxy for his right as a secularist to be the inheritor of Jewish values [4] while at the same time he disagreed with cosmopolitan liberals and expressed feelings of respect towards certain aspects of Jewish tradition. [5] Regarding the socialists he claimed that they were too quick to shrug off the role of personal misfortunes and the arrows of fate (including inequality in the division of talents and beauty among humanity) and refuse to comprehend that their social blueprints are unrealistic and Utopian. [6] Against the fatalists and cynics he claimed that they understand neither the inequality and exploitation ingrained in the capitalist system nor the justice that the socialists aspire to, which is the right to struggle for Utopia. [7] He had to fight against the political Right and Center, who did not understand the ethical and political necessities of Palestinian statehood, yet at the very same time he rose against the political Left for being blind to the fact that there is nothing to admire in the PLO. According to Oz, the PLO contaminated their struggle with more criminal acts than should a normative liberation movement and certainly much more than Zionism. [8] He also had to wrestle with two aspects of his own personality: Amos Oz, the "monk" of ethical principles, and Amos Oz, the man of political action. The latter Oz was the one who would recommend the assembling of a certain government or suggest the

name of a worthy candidate to win the primaries of the Labor party. An intrinsically liberal man, he had to explain to Jews and others that Zionism is really an umbrella term that encompasses many schools of thought, like a last name that includes many individuals with different first names (Oz, 1998: p. 9 and on in the Hebrew). Like a liberal who has a voice of his own within the choir of a pluralistic framework, Oz also had to point to his own school of thought within Zionism, his first name within the family, and he did this as well. Oz lamented the disappearance of the HaPoel HaTzair party, the party in Israel that embodied the heritage of non-Marxist moral socialism. Yet anyone who reads Oz understands from this lamentation and other speeches related to it that neither the party nor this school of thought entirely disappeared, since Oz gives it classic expression in his writings.<sup>[9]</sup> In addition, Oz had, at one and the same time, to fight against those who would oblige the writer to assume a political affiliation and also against those who do not allow the writer political affiliation at all.

Anyone who has read Oz knows that even this long list contains only a partial inventory of Oz's battles. It is clear to me, at least, that Amos Oz fashioned for himself an intensely complex identity. Alternatively, we can say that he maintains such a variegated host of identities that his outlook conforms to a camp containing only one member whose name is Amos Oz. I return to Oz's beloved author, Berdichevsky (Ben -Gurion) and say that Oz created for himself, in his social commentaries, his own "private territory within the public domain."

## **B**

And here I reach my main point. There are deep roots to the societal commitment of the Hebrew writer. Without much difficulty or fear of exaggeration we can safely present the entire Zionist movement, mainly in its East European activist version, as a movement that was born out of the spirit of literary intellectuals. This includes not only Herzl and Nordau but also Lilienblum, Smolenskin, Ahad Ha'am, Berdichevsky, Brenner and A.D. Gordon who wrote and critiqued literary works. It is hard to exaggerate the impact of the literary intellectuals on the spiritual development of the first generations of traditional Jews who abandoned Orthodoxy and turned to partial or full secularism and European culture at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The thousands of *maskilim* were thirsty for knowledge and could not read European languages. To them, writers and literary intellectuals were the embodiment of European culture. Several factors accounted for the special role played by these literary intellectuals. One was the model of the Russian literary intelligentsia, who due to the lack of political life in Russia became the primary guides of the enlightened Russian

youth for the issues of the era. Additionally, the vast majority of the former yeshiva students who left Orthodox Judaism either partially or entirely, were not familiar with European languages and thus were at least temporarily dependent on Hebrew for spiritual sustenance. Above all, the collective perception of the Jewish community, and especially of the younger generation, was that the life of the nation could not continue as in former days and a major transformation was in order. Hebrew writers tied their destinies to this anticipated transformation, and in effect took the risk that in the future they would have an audience of Hebrew readers. This was a gamble that they sometimes seemed poised to lose, since Orthodox Jews didn't read Hebrew poetry and fiction, while the more assimilated Jews were quickly losing their ties to the Hebrew language. In this way, the writers became the vanguard of a national renaissance that eventually went far beyond the confines of Hebrew literature and language that characterized the early stages of the period of Enlightenment. The renaissance started to produce social and political movements as well as organizations for self-defense and transatlantic emigration. Thus writers and literary intellectuals possessed a special stature in this historical development. These writers and intellectuals were the guides and mentors of the young Hebrew generation, and all listened attentively to their opinions on communal and national issues.

Addressing the shared anxieties of their readers, these writers demonstrated expertise in an array of topics. These ranged from broad concerns about Jewish poverty, persecution, and forced exile to issues concerning education, the renewal and preservation of the Hebrew language, and the cultural stagnation imposed by the strictures of Orthodox Judaism. In all these areas these writers were as knowledgeable as were social and political activists. Yet, in their social commentaries they never claim access to a unique source of inspiration or special knowledge reserved for writers or professional literary critics. It never occurred to them to impose spiritual commands from "on high" as did the writers and poets in the manifesto of the Greater Israel Movement.

To this rule it would appear that Ahad Ha'am or Bialik were exceptions. After all, Ahad Ha'am distinguishes between "prophet" and "priest," between "man of spirit" and "man of action," between "man of ideals" and "man of pragmatic compromise." Or at least it appears that way. But, if we look carefully we find that even Ahad Ha'am the writer shared the same plane as that of the social and political men of action of his day. Though he was deeply committed to the idea of the universal human spirit and its specific embodiment in the national spirit (beliefs that seem very dubious to many in our midst today), he saw himself as a



priest and not a prophet. Always cautioning against extremism and false visions, he was at his best as a social commentator particularly dealing with the small, practical issues of the day. These issues included the means of agricultural cultivation, the curriculum of its schools, the chances for *aliya* [emigration to Israel] and modes of absorption, the moral relations that should prevail between the Jewish newcomers and the Arab local population—in short, all the practical issues that concerned the Zionist activist. When he relates to these questions, he always speaks in the name of a knowledge that is common to him and to all public activists and regular Zionists, not in the name of an elevated “spirit”? Why else did this literary intellectual, possessed of such aristocratic manners, insist on the pseudonym of “Ahad Ha’am,” “one of the people”?

Historical periods of great change are described as “plastic hours” by Gershom Scholem, following Nietzsche’s essay on “On the Use and Abuse of History to Life.” In my opinion, these plastic hours are those critical periods in which oppressed communities seek their deliverance from oppression or deterioration. It is precisely during these periods that the man of letters, the writer, serves as the voice for a widespread consensus that is held by an entire generation. At such times it seems that the “spirit” acquires a separate identity, as it were, and once the writers or poets eloquently express the great inspiration that emanates from the plane of “spirit,” then men of action translate the elevated vision of “spirit” to practical reality. “National poets” — to the extent there is real substance behind this term — are always linked to movements of liberation from either internal or external oppressions. Thus they truly merit the responsiveness of the public who views them as its herald. But the truth is that in Hebrew literature’s tradition of commitment, the writer or person of spirit was never truly distanced from the persons of actions; the writer’s role went far beyond simply providing general inspiration. Even when writers distinguish between the vision and the dilemmas of daily life, as Ahad Ha’am or Bialik did in their commitment to public affairs, they always aspire to “deconstruct” the spirit and the elevated vision into acts of “construction.” The writer carries out his struggle on the same plane on which the men of action stand, out of basic solidarity with them. On the other hand, men of action also occasionally insist on their right to direct their listeners to the “vision.” In fact, it seems to me that words in the name of “spirit,” appear more frequently in the works of doers such as Chaim Weizman, Berel Katzenelson or David Ben-Gurion than in the works of involved writers and intellectuals such as M.L. Lilienblum, Peretz Smolenskin, Y.L. Gordon, M. Y. Berdichevsky, Y.H. Brenner, A. D. Gordon or Amos Oz.

There is no writer who understands this as Amos Oz does. He knows that the "spirit" — a sense of the pre-eminence of Man with a deeply held respect for the life and freedom of oneself and others — is not broken down according to professions and occupations. Oz consistently insists on separating fiction from political or social commentary. He feels that works of art, including literary works, are the remedy for the wounds of the creative individual that have no other cure. Following the insights of Romantic thought, he believes that through the creative process the writer is isolated from the entire world, while social commentaries are another category altogether. Since social commitment is an avenue for changing coalitions, according to the case at hand, the more non-intellectuals involved in these coalitions, so much the better.

Perhaps Plato erred, and there is no literary or philosophical aristocracy that can successfully manage the affairs of state, particularly when the state under discussion is a pluralistic democracy. Such a state does not conceive itself as derived from any generalized concept of the human spirit, but rather as tailored to answer the real needs, or even the whims, of its citizens. Even I sometimes ask myself — I confess that I am a little embarrassed to say this out loud — why can't a temperate, intelligent and enlightened person such as Amos Oz, for example, have twenty votes instead of one, on election day? Why does he have only one vote, exactly like those who shout "Death to the Arabs" and believe that this slogan is the ultimate solution to all the problems of the State? Nevertheless, as difficult as a democratic society is for sensitive artist, it is the best of all other alternatives. In the difficult period in Italy and Germany between the two world wars, artists joined the public scorn of democracy and so opted for support of Fascism and national socialism. Those who were sure that human reason or human spirit (as embodied by themselves, of course) was above democratic, parliamentary mechanisms, were themselves among the gravediggers of democracy.

Amos Oz knows far better than his critics that no matter how erudite he is in literature and philosophy, ultimately he is but one citizen out of many. Oz's insistence upon a clear distinction between fiction and social and political commentary provoked the criticism of Nissim Calderon, who objected that this dichotomy artificially fosters a mythic sense of mystery surrounding the act of artistic creation. Calderon also felt that Amos Oz had evaded his moral obligation to deal with political elements of life in Israel within his fictional works. However, in several works of fiction written subsequently Oz does deal with political issues, using a broad variety of figures. This dichotomy was not a form of evasion but

rather was a mechanism of self-protection. It seems to me that even Calderon would agree today that whether or not one agrees with Oz's sharp dichotomy, it insulated Amos Oz, the novelist, from didacticism and propaganda, as it saved his image as a writer from charges of aestheticism and elitism. This dichotomy served Oz well, and in my eyes at least, the results justified the means. It caused him to listen more carefully than any other author in Israel, to what other people in Israel were feeling and thinking. As a result of this, he talks to his readers (in complete contradistinction to the widespread accusations to the contrary) not from "on high" but at eye level, as one speaks to friends or even better, as a concerned citizen speaks to other concerned citizens. Amos Oz was not transformed into so central a persona in Israeli culture by miraculous traits bestowed on him by the muse at birth. Instead he reached his stature through qualities which he acquired by hard work and diligence. His great capacity for attentive listening, for vigilant and responsive thinking and for sharp and clear articulation, all transformed him into an Israeli literary and cultural persona who one may agree or disagree with, but who cannot be ignored or circumvented.

I would love to quote, from Oz's writings, many witty passages and concise words of truth that are directly to the point. It is not possible to bring them all, but it is equally impossible to bring nothing. Therefore I quote from something that Amos Oz wrote over twenty years ago. In this quote, the traditional role of the Hebrew writer as guide to his people, is perfectly fulfilled. These words are as appropriate for our own time, are perhaps even more relevant today than they were then:

"A nation is a group of people with a common legacy who choose to live together within the many variations and hues of their cultural and linguistic traditions. A tribe, on the other hand, is a mass of people joined together by ties of blood, religion, birth, ritual, fate and myth. We are fast retreating from a nation into a tribe." (from *Under this Blazing Light*, p. 140 of the Hebrew.)

As one of many who are partners to Amos Oz's deep fears regarding social issues –his last volume of articles could have been named "All Our Fears" instead of "All Our Hopes"—I now want to remove all pretensions to academic objectivity. I want to wish for myself and for all of us, that this worried voice of a wise and lucid observer will continue to be heard for many long years in our midst.

We need him.

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1. Amos Oz's essays on society and politics were published in Hebrew in three collections. All were translated (at least partially) into English except for *All Our Hopes*. Note that not all the essays of *Under this Blazing Light* appear in the English version. **All references to page numbers refer to the English version unless "in Hebrew" is listed.**

*Under this Blazing Light*, trans. Nicholas de Lange. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); originally published as *Ba'or Hachelet Ha'aza* (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 1979). Note that the English version includes only some of the Hebrew essays.

*The Slopes of Lebanon*, trans. by Maurie Goldberg-Bartura. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989); originally published as *Mimordot Halevanon* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1987).

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*Silence of Heaven: Agnon's Fear of God*, translated by Barbara Harshav. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, May 2000); originally published as *Shtikat Ha-Shamayim* (Keter, 1993).

In my comments on Oz's style of essay-writing I include his fourth book, *The Silence of Heaven*, which deals with the study of literature and especially Agnon's works. I also refer to essays and lists of literature and authors that are included in *Under this Blazing Light*.

2. "But I do not desire that poets appear alongside the steering wheels or control panels of government. The glimmers of emotions, the black fire of the demons, I myself recognize slightly and not from far. Those who are afflicted by it, sit and write. Alongside the governmental steering-and-brake alignment I would like to see, not a visionary expressing himself in figurative speech, but a rational pilot, enlightened, precise and dispassionate and not one who "hears voices from on high" or claims to be a "man of intuition." Thus wrote Oz in *Under this Blazing Light* (in the Hebrew).

In the many years that have passed since Oz wrote these words, he nevertheless felt hard pressed to find some kind of justification from within the very profession of writing itself that would sometimes (not always!) prepare the man of letters, more than the simple man on the street, for the "right" kind of political commitment.

"What is it that writers understand--more than shoemakers, bakers or physicians, or even members of the Knesset? There are, indeed, two characteristics that allow writers to claim that their profession bestows upon them a certain amount of proficiency; the first is the use of language . . . Poets do not merely dabble in words like a person in love dabbles with making flower bouquets. Instead they deal with words as a bacteriologist deals with bacteria: and as part of their profession. . they are sometimes able to uncover disease or the beginning of an epidemic before others. . And the second thing that poets and writers may understand just a bit more than others . . . is what their fellow man is going through." (*All Our Hopes: Reflections on the Israeli Identity*, pp. 66-67 in the Hebrew.)

The difference between Oz's earlier and later viewpoints are not insignificant although they also aren't polar opposites. It seems to me that in Oz's earlier conception, he was more aware of myths created by previous generations. In his later conception, his point of view is focused on himself and other committed writers of his generation, such as A. B. Yehoshua or David Grossman. It seems to me that the ideal outlook should be a synthesis of the two: when a writer guides the citizens and diplomats of his time, the results can be dangerous and even disastrous to society; however, the results can also be beneficial. This is not an astounding conclusion to anyone who is conversant with the history of the twentieth century. Thus the writer bears a heavy burden, since he must always prove that his commitment and involvement in society brings only the advantages that his profession affords and not "the black fire of the demons." See: Nissim Calderon, "Four Essays on Writers," in *In a Political Context* (in Hebrew) (Kibbutz Hameuchad, 1980), p. 52 and on.

3. Dan Meron, "From Creators and Builders to the Homeless," *Igra: Almanac for Literature and Art* (in Hebrew) 2 (1985-1986), p. 127. Even though Meron only explicitly mentions Oz and not other writers, it seems to me that he refers to the whole group of socially committed writers, including A.B. Yehoshua and Chaim Guri. Throughout Meron's important essay, he repeats his lament that the writer today does not receive the proper respect in the public or political arenas, as was the case in the good old days of Ahad Ha'am or Bialik or Brenner. In fact, he feels that every new stage in the relations between the two elite groups brings a decline in the status of literature: each generation is inferior to the previous one. Meron does not depart from his detailed and impressive historical description to ask analytical questions such as: Is this change really bad for literature or society? Or: Why did this process come about? He also does not ask a more detailed question such as: Was Ben-Gurion correct or not, when he refused to take into consideration the

political recommendations of Uri Zvi Greenberg or Alterman? And of course there is a different sort of momentous and philosophical question: Is the status of the writer (or of literature) in the eyes of the current political leadership, the only criterion with which to determine the value of the writer and of literature in general? If he would have asked these questions he would have entered the labyrinth of complicated issues concerning the relationship between artistic creation and the democratic society of our time. This topic was explored by Amos Oz but was not discussed by Meron. See: Dan Meron, "Document in Israel," in *Essays on Literature and Society* (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Zmora-Bitan, 1991), p. 39 and on.

4. Here is a typical formulation: "We are among those who rebelled against the absolute rule of Halakha [Jewish law] . . . Judaism is not placed before us like one giant package, take all of it or leave it, but instead as a large shelf from which we freely select what we like and what we don't" (*Under this Blazing Light*, p. 145 of the Hebrew).

5. See words of admiration mixed with harsh criticism, in which Oz identifies with the dialectic position of Berdychevsky towards "the Jewish shadow nation in East Europe": It was splendidly civilized, with a religion, law and order, systems of education and welfare, a language, civilized manners, lullabies and fairy-stories, music, justice, literature, economics, politics, power struggles, and intellectual movements: everything you could find in more prosperous civilizations also existed in that Eastern-European Jewish shadow state. It was in no way inferior to "normal" nation states, and in some respects it was far superior to them and indeed to the present-day State of Israel. Despite the terrible poverty, no one ever starved to death, and there was not a man who could not at least read and write. There have been few "normal" states, either then or now, that could boast as much. But Berdyczewski does not sing the praises of the rock from which he was hewn, and I do not want to sound an over-sentimental note: for all its intellectual resources, this Jewish shadow state was riddled with contradictions; it was founded on sexual repression, on suppressed emotion, on submissiveness, on benighted fanaticism and dead letters. That is the other side of the coin." From *Under this Blazing Light*, p. 44.

6. "It is helpful, however, not to lose sight of the fact that social injustice, political wrong and economic inequality are only one battlefield in the wider arena of human existence, and that we are hemmed in on at least three sides by our pitiful frailty, the pain of our mortality, sexual injustice and the misery of our fate. These cannot be overcome by any social system. An over-optimistic, militant socialist tends too easily to forget this supra-social, primeval anguish, and so becomes a narrow-minded, fanatical tyrant." From *Under this Blazing Light*, p. 136.

7. "Socialism. Why the embarrassed smiles on your faces? Yes, I said "socialism" and it was not a slip of the tongue or an appeal to the sentiments of old men. . . Democratic socialism is, at its very foundation, freedom and there is no concept of freedom in the world without democratic socialism. The freedom of capitalistic ideologists is a barefaced lie. That is only the freedom that is given to the strong in order to enslave and take advantage of the weak. I am almost embarrassed by this necessity to formulate such self-understood, banal concepts." (From an address to the convention of Ichud Hakibbutzim in Kfar Azza, July 1977, included in *Under this Blazing Light*, p. 144 of the Hebrew.)

8. Already in 1967, less than a month after the Six Day War, Oz spoke that Israel must "from a position of strength, allow Palestine to develop gradually in the direction of the realization of its national right to part of the land"

(*Under this Blazing Light*, p. 99). From then he became the enemy of the Israeli Right. On the other hand, his utterances about the PLO stirred the Left, and especially Israeli Arabs, against him. I myself am not sure that Oz's comments on the PLO are truly based on an objective, precise count of the number of innocent victims killed by the Etzel and Lehi during the last years of the Mandate period, not to mention the thousands of casualties of the Lebanon war. But this is not my main point. Oz's stance is problematic because of the a double roles he tried to assume: the incorruptible objective judge of two sides in a conflict, as well as the advocate for one of the sides, that is, Zionism. It is difficult, if not impossible, to be both a linesman referee of two soccer teams as well as, simultaneously, linesman of one of the teams. Below is a section that Amos Oz writes in "Letter to a Palestinian Friend": "What the Palestinians have already achieved was not attained by Arab military force nor by force of the superpowers and not even by the blood-stained might of the Jihad. Instead, it was achieved in Israel by the prevailing voices of those who realized that the occupation is immoral and inexpedient." (*All Our Hopes*, p. 113-114 of the Hebrew.)

It is an understatement to say that these issues are open to interpretation, and I have no doubt that the Arab ear would necessarily see them as patronizing. One can argue that the Palestinians would not have received from Israel even "what they have already achieved" if they had to rely exclusively on the goodwill of the Israelis. On the other hand, it is also possible to argue that Israel would have not achieved political realism and Palestinian moderation if she had solely relied on the goodwill and judiciousness of the Palestinians. It is very complex to measure the role of "ethics" in the relations between the two nations and two independence movements, when each side is sure that universal morality rests only on its shoulders. However, I only enter this political-philosophical dispute in order to portray the complexity and problematics of the committed intellectual, and especially when he take upon himself a double role: to defend his society and state in front of others—and at the same time, to serve as objective moral judge of his own society and opponents.

9. Oz, 1979. p. 147 in the Hebrew.