

Narrative Works



About Amos Reading with Our Heart

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Article abstract

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SPECIAL ISSUE: MULTIPLICITY AND COMMONALITY IN NARRATIVE INTERPRETATION

About Amos: Reading with Our Heart

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The proposed reading is guided by a deeply reflexive stance, seeing the entire “Amos” narrative as an expression of attempted escape from forgetfulness. Two introductory comments are made, about the problematic issues of analysis and of translation of narrative data. Utilizing the holistic-content reading, the piece was titled Decline, manifesting the foreclosed life story of an old, handicapped, and depressed man. From the standpoint of holistic-form reading, it was conceived as a thin story, typical of life narratives of the old. The divisions of *past versus present* and *I versus we* are proposed as analytic angles for reading the text. Special attention is paid to interruptions in the flow of the story, which may be seen as implicit meaningful messages to the listener-reader.

I would like to enter the “game” of five different readings of Amos’s life story (see Appendix) “blind”—as if I were unaware of my colleagues’ separate work on the text. In other words, I adopt as a model the recently published work by Wertz et al. (2011). In actuality, I was a discussant in a panel at the Narrative Matters Conference in Paris (2012), where some of these analyses were presented. The blindness assumption, however, is not that far from the truth, since in my advanced age I tend to forget easily—a theme that will be central to my understanding of Amos’s text in the following pages. To be reflexive—as I require of my students—I clearly experience a sense of deep identification with Amos, and this probably affected my reading. He is advanced in years, and so

am I.¹ Even though my present condition is unlike his, in almost every respect, his state of total dependency, of complete helplessness, as I gather from the text of his life story, consists of a frightful threat that I wish to avoid in my own life. It is perhaps through this process of identification that my reading brought to the forefront issues of memory and forgetting. Moreover, Amos conveys a sense of disappointment with the Kibbutz and, perhaps, the state of Israel as a whole—something that many Israelis of my generation share.

In my introduction, I would like to briefly touch upon two points. First, as I claimed years ago (Lieblich et al., 1998), the idea of narrative analysis contains an oxymoron: the mere concept of narrative contradicts the idea of analysis. While the first term, *narrative*, has the nature of one coherent unit, which is open, subjective and flowing, the second term, *analysis*, sounds fractional, systematic, objective, and focused. Many of my conversations with Ruthellen Josselson, with whom I shared years of teaching qualitative research methods, revolved around our position that what we prefer to do with narratives obtained in research—like our colleagues in the humanities—is interpretation or *reading*, in the most profound sense of the word. In other words, first and foremost we would like to interpret the life story as a whole, rather than analyze it down to its fractions, and lose the complete context of what the text expresses. After all, we deal with stories and not with questionnaires! Finally, the term *analysis* conveys a systematic method, which is inappropriate for the kind of materials involved: stories, letters, diaries, or other narratives. Every text, whether a poem, a novel, a biblical section or a life story obtained in an interview, can be read and interpreted in innumerable ways. Thus, what I offer in this short essay is a reading of Amos's life story constructed from my personal perspective, rather than an analysis of it.

Following Gadamer (2001), one of the founders of hermeneutics, I would like to utilize, in this context, the famous metaphor of a horizon, and say that in my encounter with the text under scrutiny here, Amos's horizon inevitably touches mine. The arising common horizon is materialized in *my* reading or understanding of *his* message, *my* incorporation of it and writing about it. This then results in the next emerging horizon, the one between *me* and *you*, the reader of the present text.

My second introductory comment regards translation. Amos and his interviewer, Gabriela Spector-Mersel (2014) interacted in Hebrew,

¹ As explained below, I later found out that he was much older than I, but this was not clear when I started to work on the text.

which is also my native language. The text that we all refer to is an English translation of the transcription, prepared carefully by one of our bilingual colleagues. The issue of translation in qualitative research is far beyond the scope of this paper. Cognitive research suggests that language profoundly influences the way people think and see the world. Let me mention just a few points. Human communication is burdened with several kinds of translations. Even when we share a language, every communication involves a process of translation: I, as a listener, translate the message I hear from the narrator at that moment into my own cognition (as in the metaphor of horizons above). In the present project, except for Gabriela, we all met only the text, albeit in Hebrew as well as in English, and not the speaker himself. To deal with all the relevant matters involved would not be feasible here, so allow me to ignore this complication and focus on the translation issue.

When interpreting a text produced and read in the same language, a lot of associations and connotations arise. We can only imagine the multitudes of issues that must be taken into account when a text is produced in one language, but is read, interpreted, and written about in a different language. Since Babylon's time, there is no perfect solution to this problem, even when the best translators are involved. I find the words of Nida (1991), a translation theorist, most appropriate to express my concern:

Language must be viewed not as a cognitive construct, but as a shared set of habits using the voice to communicate In both encoding and decoding there is a dialogical engagement between source and receptors.... The central focus in a sociosemiotic perspective on translation is the multiplicity of codes involved in any act of verbal communication. Words never occur without some added paralinguistic or extralinguistic features. And when people listen to a speaker, they not only take in the verbal message, but on the basis of background information and various extralinguistic codes, they make judgments about a speaker's sincerity, commitment or truth, breadth of learning, specialized knowledge, ethnic background, concern for other people, and personal attractiveness. In fact, the impact of the verbal message is largely dependent upon judgment based on these extralinguistic codes ... they are crucial for what people call their "gut feelings." (p. 28)

I have no solution to offer to this problem. I think it is important to note, however, that I read Amos's life story first of all in its English translation, but then went back to the Hebrew source whenever I felt I needed clarification. Moreover, as an Israeli native Hebrew speaker, who shares Amos's cultural background, I was able to hear what was not said, which added a lot to the meager text we have before us. I therefore feel in quite a privileged position, compared to those instances in the past, when I had to comment on and interpret life stories produced in the English, Russian, Swedish or Tibetan language.

Attempted Interpretation, or Reading with the Heart

I am writing down my reading (translating many phrases in my head from Hebrew!), as it emerged and unfolded in my home in Jaffa, during the hot summer of 2012. What follows is based on my original notes, although I have gone back to what I wrote in my first draft in order to thicken, improve and find references.

Holistic Reading: Content

Following the scheme developed by Lieblich et al., (1998), I propose to start with a *holistic reading* of the text. Reading the entire text, what are my strongest impressions or gut feelings, and what is the title by which I propose to convey them?

My immediate response was that this is a story of an old man, a story of decline. It evoked compassion on my part, as well as fear of being in a similar position. In order to avoid such personal and painful reactions, I created some distance, or "estrangement" between Amos and me, and placed the story in the academic growing field of "narrative gerontology." Aging processes at the intersection with life story research immediately came to my mind, as for example in the recent volume edited by Kenyon, Bohlmeijer and Randall (2011). This story is "closed" or "foreclosed" (Freeman, 2000); it seems to me that it has little chance of changing, and it leads to the ultimate "dead end" in Amos's future death. The text ends with a definitive "And ... that's that. About myself. What else do you want to hear?" (59), followed by a pathetic appeal to the interviewer: "Interesting?" (60). To me, this is a narrative manifestation of existential despair (Tromp, 2012). My next set of ideas referred to the question of how one can help the individual who delivers such a narrative

—a problem that need not concern us here. (See for example, Steunenberg & Bohlmeijer, 2011).

I tried to envision the narrator. How old is he? It is not part of the narrative. I calculated: he was in military service in 1942, so assuming he was 17 then, he was born in 1925. But when did Spector-Mersel interview him? Several years ago, I am sure.... Let us assume he was 80 at the time.² And we know he had been handicapped, in a wheelchair, for 15 years. He may have been suffering from diagnosed or undiagnosed depression, as his almost-weeping implies. So this is the holistic message: *Decline. The life story of an old, handicapped and depressed man.* I notice to my amazement that the entire heroic past of Amos has disappeared from this summary of my reading so far. While his past in the narrative is remote and schematic, and hardly touches me, his present state overshadows it completely. But in fact, this is the meaning of decline: you were once at the top; you are not there anymore.

Holistic Reading: Form

Our above-mentioned schema for reading narrative materials distinguishes between *content* and *form*, and between reading the *whole* versus focusing on distinct *parts* of the narrative, thus producing four cells, four different avenues to the understanding of the text. If the previous impression of aging and decline was based on the entire content, let me shift our attention to the complete form of the story, which clearly supports the initial impression. Amos's life story is extremely short and skeletal for a man who agrees to give a life story interview. I find it a striking example of what narrative therapists call a "thin story," one that they might try to "thicken" in therapy (Freedman & Combs, 1996; White & Epston, 1990). This term is also used frequently by my friends the "narrative gerontologists" (Kenyon, Bohlmeijer, & Randall, 2011). Indeed, Amos's is a very "thin" story: enumerating his past positions one by one, as steps along the way, providing names, dates, and almost no stories. The frequent hesitations and self-corrections, in lines 10-15 for example, give rise to the feeling that the narrator is making an effort not to forget any of the important steps in the ladder and to put them in the correct order. My sense is of an act of fleeing from the despair of chaos and emptiness, from a black hole of utter nothingness, which is the outcome of having forgotten your past deeds and their worth. The printed

² Spector-Mersel's (2014) background information would later indicate that he was 85 years old at the time of the interview.

page I have (and what was his intonation, I am curious to know?) is like a naked skeleton, stripped of any color of flesh. This is probably typical of very old people, and in the field of narrative care the aim is to “thicken” such stories through careful prompting and encouragement. In the present text there are almost no stories, no life that has been lived, just a list. I have a sense of the anxiety of failing memory, underlying this attempt to list all the important stations along the way. A fugitive in the world of failing memory: this is my summary of the holistic-form reading. I am surprised to discover that while my content reading mainly emerged from the second half of the text, my form reading focused on the first half. At least I did justice to both parts.

Looking at Dimensions

Following this holistic reading, *two divisions emerge*. The first division, in Amos’s own words, is based on a temporal dimension. There are two stages: *Then*: “I was active, I was in a position, a working man.” It sounds like a positive period. *Now*: “I am limited, I am in a wheelchair, I have a Filipino aide. ‘I don’t have much more than that now’” (50-51). Obviously, this is a negative period.

There is a tragic blurring of the two stages, when he wakes up and thinks that he is healthy (42), but then realizes he cannot get out of bed. Even when he says (36) something positive about the present—“The lucky thing is that ... I came out [of the stroke] with an intact mind”—it is still part of the tragedy; with his mind intact, he is aware of and “bothered” by his condition. The only surviving ability he maintains is reading.

Pausing to consider here the distinction between narratives of redemption and of contamination (McAdams & Bowman, 2001) is very revealing. While Amos indeed recognizes his luck in coming out of the stroke with an intact mind, he does not seem to view it as “redemption,” but rather as “contamination.” *Even good luck turns against me*.

The second division, on a social-historical dimension, is between *my own history* and that of *the collective*—the youth movement, the army, the State, the Kibbutz. Being completely tuned to the collective narrative, Amos is unable or unwilling to give a proper description of the circumstances of meeting his wife, and it is she, apparently present in the interview (and she was—I see this in Spector-Mersel’s background information later), who tries to correct him and “thicken” his account.

Formally, we could look at the four cells that result from this 2x2 matrix (again!), but I have decided not to follow this formal possibility. I do notice, however, that these two divisions intersect, since for the first half of his life, Amos seems to be propelled by these grand collective institutions; the story of “me” emerges only when he starts to speak about retirement. The story of “we” is dominant, as the ethos of this generation in Israeli culture, a generation often titled “the we generation” (Spector-Mersel, 2008). Towards the end of the narrative, the private and the collective narratives merge, as Amos's limited physical state coincides with the decline of the kibbutz: “there isn’t a dining room anymore ... no activity” (57-58). *The Kibbutz is as paralyzed as I am.*

Interruptions of the Flow

In examining separate parts of the text, it is interesting to dwell upon *what interrupts the formal flow* of dates and institutions. I find four such different occasions:

1. An interaction with his *wife*, who provides a more narrative version of their meeting. He ignores her attempt to lift the story into a more personal realm by “Okay” (19). I understand his speech act as saying: *Okay, but I'm not interested in the private, only in the collective sphere.*
2. Suppressed *weeping*; this actually is reported twice. The emotion, which he tries to overcome, creates a brief time-out in his narration (13, 40). The first “suppressed weeping” occurs when Amos is trying to recall military events, maybe difficult combat scenes of pain or loss. Another option could be that he is crying because he experiences the fading of his important memories. The second “suppressed weeping” happens when Amos talks about the deceitful moment when he forgets that he is an invalid. To me, both places are about forgetting—one in reference to the remote past, and the second, to a more recent time. He is saying to me: *Look, my story is so thin. Because I cannot hold on to the events as they occurred, I forget these very important pieces of my life and it becomes a puzzle with so many missing pieces.* Note that the only emotion reported is weeping—no laughter, etc.
3. The only “*story*” about the factory (25-35) also interrupts the flow of Amos's thin narrative and creates a separate time-zone of a

story-within-a-story, the most detailed and longest episode in the narrative. It is a story that can rescue his self image from oblivion, from the image of the helpless old man. "It is the only thing that supports Gev" (34), he concludes. But this positive mood is cruelly interrupted by the "Zbeng," which appears in the very same line (35), reminding me of McAdams' pattern of contamination (McAdams & Bowman, 2001). Why has this episode has remained alive? I suppose that it does not require reminiscence—it is right there, at the present moment in his life space at the kibbutz; he cannot forget it. All his other past achievements do not have present markers in his life, and therefore disappear.

4. A clear pause in the telegraphic style appears also in the relatively detailed description of his present physical condition as a disabled old man (43-50).

If we pay special attention and regard these interruptions as meaningful messages to the listener, I would summarize them as follows:

I have a family, but we will not speak about it right now.

I am sad about the way my life turned out and the limited access to my vague past.

I had some important achievements when I was in my prime.

Right now I am helpless, "I don't have much more than that" (50).

So, after all, this "thin" story reveals a lot when we read it with our heart.

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Appendix: Amos's Story*

1 I was born in Poland. I came at the age of two. I came -- (they)¹
 2 **brought** me. We at the first stage, because my **mother's** family
 3 mainly, were in *Balfur*,² so we came to *Balfur* for a few years. After
 4 that we moved to *Tel Aviv*. In *Tel Aviv* I was... I studied at the *Beit*
 5 *Chinuch*, the *A. D. Gordon Beit Chinuch*, and after that at *Chadash*³
 6 High School – continuation. And...secondary school. And I was a
 7 member of the *Machanot Olim*.⁴ For a long time. Within **this**
 8 framework I was sent to the *Palmach*.⁵ Because then we had reached
 9 the point that all *Hachshara*⁶ provided a quota for the *Palmach*. It
 10 was still before (they) had recruited all the *Hachsharas*. And I was in
 11 the *Palmach*, from the year... '42...no...don't remember, '42. I was
 12 in...2nd Company. After that we moved over to the 4th Battalion
 13 [suppressed weeping]. After that in the Negev Brigade. I was...in the
 14 beginning a squad commander, after that a platoon commander, and
 15 after that...an officer in the Brigade, and... That's how I drifted
 16 through the army and I finished as a Lieutenant-Colonel. And...that
 17 was already within the territorial defense. And in the territorial
 18 defense I met her. [His wife: *Not like that, you met me in a radio*
 19 *course. You were an instructor and I was a trainee.*] Okay. And
 20 when I was released from the army I came to *Gev*. Since then I have
 21 been at *Gev*. In various roles. Community coordinator, treasurer,
 22 and...after that I went...to work in the movement. In the UKM.⁷ I
 23 was...in the UKM for six years. Coordinator of the Health
 24 Committee. I was...and after that back to *Gev*, I worked for a few
 25 years in agriculture. After that, (they)assigned me -- (they) assigned,
 26 I took on the task of establishing a factory, and I established the
 27 factory called "*Gevit*." A paper products factory. And I managed it
 28 up until I retired, actually. **Half**-retired. I had already wanted to be
 29 replaced. And it so happened that **today** the factory... When I
 30 established the factory it was...a bit of a problem in *Gev*. It was a big
 31 investment, and (they) weren't used to that. And...in the beginning it
 32 limped along a bit. And then (they) actually began...to run after me.
 33 Why did you create this white elephant and why that... In the end
 34 that factory **today**, is the only thing that supports *Gev*. A lot for
 35 production, a lot... That's it, until...I got a **zbeng**.⁸ A stroke. Since
 36 then I'm bound to the chair and... **The lucky thing** is that...as
 37 opposed to others, and I say as opposed, because I came out with an
 38 **intact** mind. It bothers me quite a bit these days. Meaning...the shift
 39 between **disability** and activity, it creates a problem for me,
 40 sometimes I...I think that I [suppressed weeping] am healthy today,

* Transcription and notes, Spector-Mersel (2014).

41 in (my) thinking. (I) read books, read the newspaper, read...
 42 television. So when I think that I'm **healthy**, and I try...to **do**
 43 accordingly, **physically** – doesn't work. For instance getting out of
 44 bed, beforehand I got up by myself. Now I don't get up by myself. In
 45 walking I'm completely limited. And...and...these days I go back
 46 and forth between thinking that I'm healthy and **the future**, that I'm
 47 limited. And that's it, it's already...15 years. Essentially sitting in the
 48 chair. And that's a **long** time. Very long. And along with that I
 49 have...a Filipino aide. He really does help me a lot. And this is how I
 50 go through my life. I don't have much more than that now. I
 51 was...when I was active, I was a member of the political party
 52 center, the council. I was...pretty active in the UKM, I was in a
 53 position, I was a **working** man – in agriculture, I was in the
 54 community, community coordinator, I was treasurer. That's my life.
 55 Always in public affairs. Until I got sick. I got sick, so it took me out
 56 of the...frame. I stopped going to the (kibbutz communal) dining
 57 room – now there isn't a dining room anymore. (I) don't listen to the
 58 (kibbutz assembly) meetings, no activity. I was limited, mostly the
 59 walking limited me. And...that's that. About myself. What else do
 60 you want to hear? Interesting?

TRANSCRIPTION NOTES:

“--” signifies a break in the discourse and shift in tone, as if the teller is correcting himself

“–” signifies a break in the discourse, generally continuing in the same tone but without a pause that would warrant a comma

Boldface signifies stronger emphasis in pitch

¹ In colloquial Hebrew, the third-person masculine plural verb form (“they sent me”) is commonly used to send a passive message that defocuses the agent; either because it is unknown or irrelevant, or contrarily, obvious and primary. When “they” (or any other pronoun) is in parentheses, it signifies that the pronoun itself is not used with the related verb.

² A cooperative Zionist settlement established in the 1920s.

³ Both are well-known schools identified with the Zionist settlement.

⁴ A Zionist youth movement.

⁵ Literally, the acronym for “strike force,” the *Palmach* was the elite fighting force of the *Haganah*, the underground army of the pre-state Jewish settlement under the British Mandate in Palestine.

⁶ Under the British Mandate in Palestine, youth group movements that were mobilized toward agricultural settlement would go out to kibbutzim for a training period.

⁷ Abbreviation for *United Kibbutzim Movement*, the umbrella organization of all the kibbutzim.

⁸ Yiddish for “a bang.”