

Israel Through the
Jewish-American Imagination
*A Survey of Jewish-American Literature
on Israel, 1928–1995*

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Israel, the Foremost Preoccupation of the American Jew

In 1955, just seven short years after the founding of the Jewish state, Harold Ribalow recognized a revelatory characteristic of Jewish-American literature on Israel:

[T]he American Jew today represents the largest Jewish community in the world: his reaction to Israel, creatively as well as philanthropically, may well measure the intimacy between the Israeli and the American Jew, as well as the chasm between them. The establishment of Israel already has led to a handful of novels on Israel and, inferentially, on the relationship between the Israeli and the Diaspora Jew. The wealth of the future literature on Israel, its depth, its sensitivity and its authenticity, is bound to be a true gauge of the impact of Zion reborn on a Jewish people which has survived to enjoy the miracle of Israel. (“Zion” 591)

As we near Israel’s fiftieth birthday, the time seems ripe to explore the Jewish-American fiction on Israel that Ribalow anxiously anticipated. How have Jewish-American writers imagined Israel? What does this imaginative writing reveal about the relationship between the Israeli and the Diaspora Jew over the years? How has the literature gauged the impact of the Jewish state on the American Jewish community?

It would be difficult to overstate this “impact” of the Jewish state in forging the ethos of Jewish-Americans. Arthur Hertzberg and Leonard Fein only slightly overstate matters when they suggest that Israel *became* the religion of the American Jews after the Six-Day War of 1967 (Solotaroff, “The Open Community” xv). In an insightful article published in *The New York Times Book Review*, Ted Solotaroff observes that “since

the Six-Day War the survival of Israel has been the paramount concern of organized Jewish life and probably the paramount source of Jewish identity” (“American Jewish Writers” 33). However, while Jewish-American writers have written prolifically since the 1960s about the Holocaust (the other central Jewish event of the twentieth century), it would be disingenuous to suggest that Israel has carved out an equally substantial niche for itself in the Jewish-American writer’s imagination. Ribalow, writing in 1955, surely expected that “the future literature on Israel” would demand more space today in the library stacks than it presently does.

Several critics have bemoaned the relatively minor role Israel has played in Jewish-American fiction. Looking back recently upon the 1960s, Robert Alter recalls his bewilderment that Jewish-American writers “could so regularly imagine a world in which Israel was scarcely even a presence on a distant horizon” (“Defenders” 55). Naomi Sokoloff also notes the relative dearth of Jewish-American fiction on Israel given the enormous impact of the state upon Jewish existence: “Given the importance of Israel for American Jewish identity and communal self-expression, considering the quantities of ink spilled on polemics about relations between the two cultures, and taking into account the increasing familiarity of each with the other, not much imaginative writing has addressed this topic in a substantive way” (65).

Despite Alter’s and Sokoloff’s puzzlement concerning the shortage of Jewish-American imaginings of Israel, one can readily enough understand the reluctance on the part of these writers to engage Israel seriously in their work. After all, one must remember that Israel is not their country; most Jewish-American writers thus lack the palpable and intimate knowledge of Israel that could stimulate good fiction. Leslie Fiedler, a forceful critical voice in literary matters Jewish, expressed how “strange” Israel appears to, perhaps, most American Jews when he remarked poignantly, “. . . I feel myself more hopelessly a foreigner in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv and the Holy City of Safad than I do in Rome or Bologna or Florence. . . . Israel remains for me, even when I walk its streets, somehow an abstraction, a metaphor from a dull, half-forgotten sermon” (8). It is this very strangeness of Israel that prompted Bernard Malamud to announce that he would write about Israel if he knew about it, but since he didn’t, he would leave it to the Israeli writers (Field 50). Sanford Pinsker suggests some other reasons why Jewish-American writers tend to “shy away from writing about the Middle East”—most

notably, their wariness of the possible sentimentality of such fiction and, conversely, their recognition of the *chutzpah* implicit in any attempt to offer a critical glance at Israel's political landscape from "the smug safety of American soil" ("William Faulkner" 412, 400). Small wonder, indeed, that the protagonist's feet in Jewish-American fiction have, for the most part, been planted squarely on American terrain (see Chapter 7 for a more elaborate discussion concerning the Jewish-American writers' reluctance to engage Israel in their work).

Given such a gloomy description of Jewish-American literature about Israel, one might reasonably question whether the fiction warrants a book-length study in the first place. Despite my own skepticism, I discovered that two principal characteristics of the literature demanded the undertaking of such a study. First, as Harold Ribalow predicted, the literature that does exist serves as an incisive gauge of the impact of Israel upon the Jewish-American ethos. Secondly, the zeitgeist in the American Jewish intellectual community has shifted dramatically to precipitate a recent surge of Jewish-American fiction on Israel. To place this paradigm shift in historical perspective, one must remember that the renowned (predominantly Jewish) New York intellectuals earlier in this century—Philip Rahv, Irving Howe, Alfred Kazin, Lionel Trilling, and Daniel Bell, to sound off a few—haggled over the hot topics of alienation, marginality, and anti-Stalinism in the pages of such magazines as *Partisan Review*, *Dissent*, *Commentary*, and *Midstream*. Concomitantly, the fiction of Jewish-American writers like Abraham Cahan, Anzia Yezierska, Saul Bellow, Isaac Rosenfeld, Delmore Schwartz, Bernard Malamud, and others revolved largely around these same themes. Today, the Middle East, rather than anti-Stalinism, is the pressing issue. In the very periodicals listed above (and in additional ones like *Tikkun* and *The New Republic*), intellectuals like Ruth Wisse, Michael Walzer, Norman Podhoretz, Robert Alter, Edward Alexander, Cynthia Ozick, Michael Lerner, and Martin Peretz prove that their Hawk and Dove disputes in regard to Israeli foreign policy have replaced the battles, waged earlier in this century, between warring socialist factions of the Jewish-American intelligentsia.

Likewise, Jewish-American writers ("post-alienated," as Lillian Kremer contends) are increasingly abandoning the nearly tapped-out muses of marginality and alienation to engage Israel seriously as a theme (Kremer, "Post-alienation" 571). The ever-growing list of these works includes such novels as Mark Helprin's *Refiner's Fire* (1977), E. M.

Broner's *A Weave of Women* (1978), Jay Neugeboren's *The Stolen Jew* (1981), Nessa Rapoport's *Preparing for Sabbath* (1981), Anne Roiphe's *Lovingkindness* (1987), Deena Metzger's *What Dinah Thought* (1989), Philip Roth's *The Counterlife* (1986) and *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (1993), Carol Magun's *Circling Eden: A Novel of Israel* (1995), and Tova Reich's *Master of the Return* (1988) and *The Jewish War* (1995). That Ted Solotaroff and Nessa Rapoport's recent anthology of Jewish-American fiction, *Writing Our Way Home: Contemporary Stories by American Jewish Writers* (1992), contains three stories set in Israel also illustrates the increasing attention the Jewish state presently demands from Jewish-American writers. Solotaroff notes that, "given the welter of new social and cultural influences that are redefining America as a multi-ingredient soup rather than a melting pot, it is not surprising that the subject of Jewish identity is increasingly being set against an Israeli background" ("The Open Community" xxii). Moreover, in a recent article in the *Philadelphia Jewish Exponent*, Sanford Pinsker puts forward his own prediction concerning Jewish-American fiction on Israel: "if my reading of the *Zeitgeist* is correct, one can look forward to a new renaissance of Jewish-American fiction about Israel in the next decade" ("They Dream" 8-x).

I would like to suggest that the Jewish-American writers' relatively new exploration of the fictional possibilities of Israel contributes greatly to the renaissance today in Jewish-American fiction as a whole. For Irving Howe's cynical suggestion in 1977 that "American Jewish fiction has probably moved past its high point" was rooted in his view that American Jewish life after the immigrant experience of marginality and alienation would prove too sterile and unrecognizably Jewish to inspire a new wave of Jewish-American literature ("Introduction" 16). "[T]here just isn't enough left of that [immigrant] experience," Howe lamented (16); and at least one other prominent critic, Leslie Fiedler, agreed (see Fiedler xii, 117). Thankfully, Howe (while correct about a good many things) was wrong in assuming that the immigrant experience alone embodied the Jewish-American identity. What the present surge of Jewish-American literature on Israel tells us, in the most general sense, is that American Jews define themselves today by looking not only toward Eastern Europe and the Lower East side of New York—toward the dimming "world of our fathers," to borrow Howe's phrase—but toward the West Bank, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and the Golan Heights as well.

What specifically, though, does Jewish-American fiction on Israel tell us about American Jews, Israel, and the relationship between the

two communities? These are the questions I endeavor to answer in the chapters to follow. I will resist the temptation here merely to summarize the main arguments of these chapters. Instead, it might prove helpful to flesh out the historical context surrounding the authors whom I discuss by adumbrating three essential relational phases between American Jews and Israel during this century: pre-Zionism, Zionism, and post-Zionism. For the eight authors included in this study have all necessarily challenged or espoused the prevailing temper of their day.

Since I consider works spanning from 1928 to 1995, it should come as no surprise that the American Jewish relationship toward Israel throughout these sixty-seven years has fluctuated every bit as much as the generic conventions of fiction during this time. Indeed, the relationship has proven both dynamic and tumultuous, and these qualities manifest themselves prevalently as Jewish-American writers choose to imagine Israel in their work. To impose a somewhat reductive framework upon this relationship, one might use the term pre-Zionist (or anti-Zionist) to define the American Jewish perspective toward the idea of a Jewish state from the time of Theodor Herzl's first Zionist Congress in 1897 in Basel, Switzerland, until roughly 1947 (when the atrocities of the Holocaust gained clarity in the United States). As Martin Peretz, the Editor-in-Chief of *The New Republic*, notes in a recent speech, "the Zionists before the war were surely a minority among Jews, in some countries a very small minority. Their authority came with the war and after, when their admixture of analysis and prophecy that European soil was doomed territory for the Jews had already been proven true in the blood of millions" (7–8). Before the war, to elaborate upon Peretz's comment, practically every kind of Jew one can imagine excoriated Zionism. As Irving Howe writes in his landmark study, *World of Our Fathers*:

A good number of Orthodox Jews regarded [Zionism] as "Torahless," a heretical effort to transpose messianic expectation from the transcendent to the mundane sphere. . . . the Reform rabbis had passed a resolution declaring themselves "unalterably opposed to political Zionism" and, in a startling sentence, had added, "America is our Zion." The Jewish socialists regarded Zionism as a troublesome competitor, a bourgeois delusion that could only distract the masses from struggling for their liberation. The Yiddishists were enraged by the Zionist depreciation of the whole Diaspora experience. (207)

Indeed, for religious, assimilationist, socialist, or downright traditionalist reasons, Zionism was a staggeringly unpopular movement among American Jews until the Holocaust convinced a majority of the dissenters that Jews needed their own state if they were to survive as a people.

The term pre-Zionist, then, accurately describes the zeitgeist of the American Jewish community before the Holocaust. The terms Zionist and post-Zionist—which I use to describe the latter two phases of the American Jewish relationship with Israel—are more nebulous and demand careful scrutiny. For Zionism, at its philosophical core, is a critical orientation of inquiry, not the complacent, uncritical “pro-Israel” orientation as most people believe. A leading Jewish magazine, *Midstream*, aptly defines Zionism as “a questioning of the Jewish *status quo*, and a steady confrontation of the problems of Jewish existence.” So, essentially, a true Zionist should engage Israel from the very same critical perspective as those who today carry the “post-Zionist” banner. Now, before one even hazards to define the term, post-Zionist, it demands immediate qualification, because it implies something that the vast majority of those calling themselves post-Zionists do not mean to imply—namely, that they do not believe in the legitimacy of Israel’s existence. As Michael Lerner, perhaps the most vociferous post-Zionist, argues, “Post-Zionists are Jews who fervently support the State of Israel, believe that its welfare and military security must be ensured, but who wish to see an Israel based on tolerance; an honoring of the multicultural realities of the people living within its borders . . .” (“Post-Zionism” 261).

A true understanding of Zionism, then, should render the term “post-Zionism” obsolete. Sadly, perhaps, anyone who has flipped through a Jewish or political magazine lately knows that the “post” prefix, like its cousin “neo,” is here to stay. So, the “Zionist” phase in America, for better or for worse, refers to the period of the greatest, most uncritical, American Jewish support of Israel, the period when most (though not all) American Jews accepted Israel’s moral righteousness almost without question. The founding of Israel in 1948 precipitated this period, and it reached its zenith just after Israel’s stunning defeat of the combined Arab forces in the 1967 Six-Day War. Midge Decter captures this euphoric Jewish-American vision of Israel during the Zionist phase in some recent reminiscences: “Created out of an act of long overdue international justice, the country was, at once and at last, to be a safe haven for Jews, a model of social existence, and a rich ground for the efflorescence of a new and lovely Jewish culture” (“American Jews” 31).

Given the spiritual stock that American Jews placed in Israel, one can easily grasp why Hebrew schools (like the one I attended) taught young Jews not to question Israel's policies and encouraged unflinching loyalty toward the state.

Indeed, American Jews only reluctantly began to speak out against Israel; irrespective of Hebrew school indoctrination, most American Jews who criticize Israeli policy do so with the sobering recognition that their Israeli counterparts are the ones who must live with these policies, that the *Israelis* are the ones who cannot take their lives for granted. Henry Feingold describes this practically untenable position of American Jews when it comes to anything that they might have to say about the Middle East: "I have heard American Zionism called 'air conditioned Zionism' . . . Just as American Jews have developed Judaism without the yoke of Torah, so they also have Zionism without the yoke of aliya" (22). But despite the precarious position of those who would criticize Israel, there can be little doubt that American Jewry's heady Zionist phase of overwhelming uncritical support of Israel has come to an end. It was only a matter of time, perhaps, before Jews would begin to redefine how one might express one's "loyalty" toward the Jewish state; and recently, a growing number of American Jews express their commitment to the state, they believe, through their careful scrutiny—rather than unreflective support—of Israeli policy. Michael Lerner marks the beginning of this "post-Zionist" period in the 1990s as Israel implicitly acknowledged the credibility of the post-Zionist critiques of the Israeli Occupation:

In the 1990s, Israel received a second birth, this time in joy and in peace. After decades of building itself into one of the world's strongest military powers, Israel chose a new direction. In 1993 it signed an accord with the Palestine Liberation Organization. Mutual recognition and peace were the central goals of that accord. In so doing, Israel had started on the path of post-Zionism, in which Jewish values could eventually triumph over the worship of power, and Jewish compassion could replace Jewish rage. ("Post-Zionism" 221)

True, some American Jews do not share Michael Lerner's optimistic account of the 1993 accord between Israel and the PLO. Ruth Wisse, for one, wonders in her article, "Peace Not," "If Arabs went to war against Israel in 1967 when all the disputed territories were in their hands, what's to keep them from repeating the process?" ("Peace Not" 16). Still, no one who has kept an ear to the ground regarding the American Jew-

ish relationship with Israel would deny that American Jews have increasingly spoken out both for Palestinian rights and against perceived Israeli wrongs. In regard to Lerner's use of the term, post-Zionism, I would only mark an earlier date at which this phase ensued in America. For Israel's military incursions into Lebanon from June to September of 1982—and, more precisely, Israel's well-publicized role while there in facilitating the Phalangist militiamen's massacre of hundreds of Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps—initiated the post-Zionist phase. As Elaine M. Kauvar suggests, “[t]he Israeli incursion into Lebanon elicited an outbreak of criticism from members of the American Jewish community,” as large numbers of American Jews began finally to question their previously intransigent presumption of Israel's moral purity (343).

Two events later in the 1980s exacerbated these initial tensions between American Jews and Israel and set the post-Zionist phase in full swing. First, in November 1985, a Jewish-American Navy intelligence analyst, Jonathan J. Pollard, was arrested in the United States for providing top-secret military data to the Israelis. Several American Jews were shocked that Israel would sink so low as to spy on their long-time benefactor, the United States, and rushed to express their American patriotism by vociferously repudiating both Pollard and the Israelis (one might rightly view in analogous terms the Jewish-American community's repudiation of the Rosenbergs earlier in this century). Then, in December 1987, the Palestinian uprising, or *intifada*, began. The nightly news film of heavily armed Israeli soldiers chasing down and occasionally shooting or beating rock-wielding Palestinian teenagers went a long way toward shattering the heroic image of the Israeli soldier to which most American Jews had clung up until that point. A January 28, 1988, Op-Ed piece in *The New York Times* by one notorious American Jew, Woody Allen, betrays the post-Zionist shift in the tide of the American Jewish relationship with Israel subsequent to the *intifada*. The barrage of media coverage illustrating apparent excessive force by the Israeli military toward the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories provoked Allen to write, “I am appalled beyond measure by the treatment of the rioting Palestinians by Jews. I mean, fellas, are you kidding? . . . Breaking the hands of men and women so they can't throw stones? Dragging civilians out of their houses at random to smash them with sticks in an effort to terrorize a population into quiet? . . . Am I reading the newspapers correctly?” (A27). Enough is enough, Allen

seems to say, and he does not stand alone. An unprecedented number of American Jews today apparently believe that “. . . for all of us who are rooting for Israel to continue to exist and prosper the obligation is to speak out” when Israel violates its democratic principles by committing human rights abuses (Allen A27).

Let me emphasize that large segments of the American Jewish population were, and continue to be, outraged by public American Jewish denunciations of Israeli policy, à la Woody Allen. As recently as 1993, several prominent American Jewish intellectuals like Edward Alexander, Cynthia Ozick, Marie Syrkin, and Jacob Neusner contributed to a collection of essays entitled, *With Friends Like These: The Jewish Critics of Israel*, in which they challenge the validity of such Allen-like American Jewish critiques of Israel. A year earlier, Ruth Wisse also took Israel’s critics to task in her book-length study, *If I Am Not For Myself . . . : The Liberal Betrayal of the Jews*. However, though several intelligent and sensitive American Jews refuse to subscribe to the post-Zionist temper, one would be hard pressed to argue that their ardent pro-Israel message resonates through the American Jewish community with the same force as it did, say, fifteen years ago. The aforementioned events of the 1980s forced most American Jews to take a more critical look at Israel. Moreover, while the 1991 Israeli Information Center for Human Rights report on the torture of Palestinian prisoners probably eluded most American Jews, Amnesty International’s July 1993 report that Palestinians under interrogation by the Israelis are “systematically tortured or ill-treated” was widely publicized and certainly took its toll on the PR between Israel and American Jews (Qtd. in Greenberg 3). In the pages of *The New York Times*, American Jews read detailed reports of Israel’s alleged abuses of Palestinian prisoners in the Occupied Territories. One such article highlighted Amnesty International’s conclusion that Palestinian prisoners were deprived of sleep for days on end while “typically held on small chairs, their heads covered with dirty, foul-smelling sacks and their hands tied behind them to the chair or to a wall” (Greenberg 3). Alas, as Thomas Friedman notes, “the Lebanon invasion, the Pollard espionage affair, and the Palestinian *intifada* really forced American Jews to look at some of the more unpleasant, but very real, rhythms of political life in today’s Israel—instead of just the episodic moments of celebration” (478). Israel’s most recent 1996 incursions into Lebanon, during which scores of Lebanese civilians lost their lives, threaten to strain relations further between American and Israeli Jews.

Lest one infer that Israeli aggression alone precipitated America's post-Zionist milieu, let me emphasize that other, more welcome, factors than the regrettable events of the 1980s have worked to define our present, skeptical mood in regard to the Middle East. Most significantly, perhaps, the normalization of Israel as a nation provides for an atmosphere in which Jews on the left are much less reluctant to speak out against Israeli policy. That is, as Israel becomes more established as a nation and its existence becomes less and less tenuous, American Jews on the left feel (prematurely, some argue) that they can publicly scrutinize Israeli human rights abuses just as they publicly denounce, say, China's or South Africa's human rights violations. Interestingly, American Jews on the political right (most of whom carry the Zionist banner free of its current "post" prefix) also scarcely hesitate these days to criticize Israeli policies. However, what prompts their criticism is the fear that Shimon Peres's Labor government, as evidenced in its dovish policies toward the Palestinians, has placed too much stock in Israel's normalcy. Just after the late Yitzhak Rabin initiated a peace accord with the PLO, the neoconservative Norman Podhoretz retracted his former position that "American Jews had no moral right to criticize Israel's security policies" (19). The advent of the Labor government's more progressive agenda toward its Arab neighbors presented an "entirely new situation," according to Podhoretz, in which "the real danger . . . is that Israel will be too 'flexible' in its desperate eagerness to conclude agreements both with the Syrians and with the Palestinians" (20). Podhoretz thus roundly criticizes Israel's peace accord with the PLO in three separate articles (see *Commentary*, April and June 1993 and December 1994). American Jewish criticism of Israeli policy, then, bristles currently in both the progressive pages of *Tikkun* and the conservative pages of *Commentary*.

Before one laments this surge of American Jewish criticism of Israel as if it were an indication of the American Jews' flagging commitment to the state, one should at least note that Israelis themselves are immersed every bit as much in the contentious spirit of the day. A wave of Israeli "new historians" have just begun in the last seven or eight years to offer unprecedented, critical analyses of the Zionist movement and, specifically, of Israel's culpability for the present Palestinian crisis in the Middle East (Avi Shlaim's *Collusion Across the Jordan* and Benny Morris's *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949* and *Israel's Border Wars, 1949–1956* immediately come to mind). As Clyde Haber-

man notes, “Even legendary Zionist heroes are being re-evaluated. . . . Israelis have long been told that [Joseph Trumpeldor’s] last words were, ‘It is good to die for our land.’ Now, new accounts say he actually died with curses in his native Russian on his lips” (“Meet a New” A1, A7). Certainly, a good many Israelis closer to the political right bemoan this post-Zionist hoopla in Israel. Hillel Halkin, for one, is more than a bit perturbed that “the central myths of Zionism, which for four or five generations successfully linked Jewish settlement in Palestine, and the existence of the state of Israel, to 3,000 years of Jewish history, no longer speak to much of Israeli society and its current political leadership” (“Israel Against Itself” 35). Furthermore, in a leading Israeli newspaper, *Ha’aretz*, the Israeli novelist Aharon Megged recently admonished Israeli post-Zionist scholars like Benny Morris. He goes so far as to accuse them of doing Satan’s work. Other Israelis, however, like Gershon Gorenberg, welcome the advent of Israeli post-Zionist scholarship as it “allows for writing a more nuanced, balanced drama, in which both Arabs and Jews are flawed figures in history’s tragedy” (22). At any rate, my hunch is that both Israeli and American Jews, from both the traditional Zionist and post-Zionist perspectives, will continue to wrangle over whose version of history merits transmission to the next generation. Since Israel has now miraculously survived to create almost a half-century of history for itself, it strikes me as only prudent that scholars and lay people should begin to examine this history and clash over it in essential ways.

Which is simply to suggest that our current post-Zionist milieu does not so much mark the end of the American Jewish relationship with Israel as it does mark the beginning, perhaps, of a more honest relationship between the two communities. For, whatever positive things one might say about American Jewry’s most fervently Zionist phase, one must also acknowledge that the American Jewish affinity for Israeli Jews during this period was based largely (though not wholly) upon a sentimental vision of the heroic Israeli *kibbutz* or soldier. After the Holocaust, Jews were eager to embrace the image of the strong and courageous Israeli soldier—no matter how accurate that image was—to replace the image of the *nebbisheh* (weak) Diaspora Jew, the victim of Hitler’s Holocaust. One Israeli, Haim Chertok, recognizes this superficial element of the American Jewish relationship with Israel when he notes, “American support for Israel is like anti-Semitism. Both are not much affected by what Jews do or do not do” (189). As one

might infer from the tenor of Chertok's comment, he and other Israelis grow increasingly weary of such American Jewish "support," characteristic of America's "Zionist" phase. Fortunately, most Israelis have not given up on American Jews and, instead, encourage American Jews to eschew their romantic notions of Israelis and to embrace them for whom they really are. In a recent *Wall Street Journal* article, Amy Dockser Marcus reports that the United Israel office, in its effort "to create a future with Americans . . . is attempting to immerse visiting American Jewish donors in Israeli life as it really is, rather than indulge them in the old stereotypes of settlers and soldiers" (A4). To their credit, American post-Zionists, in defiance of those who still "want to see the heroic Israel, Israel facing the odds," do endeavor to see Israeli life as it really is (Marcus A4). Likewise, those Jewish-American intellectuals today who tout a more hard-line Zionism (like Ruth Wisse, Norman Podhoretz, Cynthia Ozick, and Edward Alexander) argue from a critical and historically astute, rather than nostalgic, perspective. Thus, if my reading of the zeitgeist is correct, post-Zionism just might mark the birth of a genuine relationship between American and Israeli Jews, in which American Jews will finally know Israeli Jews (and vice-versa) by what they do rather than by what they symbolize.

I hope that my cursory description of the three phases thus far of the American Jewish relationship with Israel provides a contextual lens through which the reader might read not only the following chapters but also Jewish-American literature on Israel in general. In the eight chapters that follow, I will, of course, have more specific things to say about these relationship phases; as I have already implied, each of the eight writers I consider sheds light (and sometimes heat) upon these phases, because they necessarily generate their fiction amid the tumult of one phase or the other. While I make no claims at comprehensiveness, I have endeavored to offer a fairly representative analysis of Jewish-American literature on Israel by selecting at least one author from each of the three phases and by selecting a group of writers whose works, taken as a whole, encompass the wide range of Middle East concerns that Jewish-Americans (both writers and lay people) have expressed during this century.

I have, thus far, argued that (a) the American Jewish relationship with Israel has evolved in concrete ways, and that (b) a thorough understanding of how this relationship has evolved yields a richer interpretation of Jewish-American literature on Israel. I would like now to focus more specifically upon this literature, to explore how it has evolved as

well. Tempting though it may be, I will resist the urge to name three evolutionary phases of the literature to complement the three relational phases named above. While the terms pre-Zionist, Zionist, and post-Zionist aptly characterize the evolution of the Jewish-American relationship with Israel, the evolution of Jewish-American fiction on Israel—though inextricably connected to the relational phases—has evolved in ways too various and complex to be reducible to three discrete categories. This is not to say that there exists no general principle governing the evolution of the literature. For the eight authors I chose to explore (in relatively chronological order) betray major shifts in the political orientation and, hence, imaginative power of the Jewish-American author in regard to the Middle East.

How, one might ask, does a writer's political orientation inform his or her imaginative powers? Irving Howe's description of the "political novel," in *Politics and the Novel* (1957), proves helpful in illustrating this relationship between ideology and imagination. In the study, he describes the political novel as one in which "political ideas play a dominant role or in which the political milieu is the dominant setting. . . . Perhaps it would be better to say: a novel in which *we take to be dominant* political ideas or the political milieu . . ." (*Politics* 17). Reading these lines from Irving Howe's 1957 study today, one recognizes readily—in spite of Howe's italicized proviso—how out of favor his essential premise has become. Indeed, any graduate student in English worth his or her salt these days would hasten to note the absurdity of singling out, as Howe does, certain overtly political novels. Howe's introduction would, no doubt, be welcomed by today's graduate students with a resounding chorus of "All novels are political," or perhaps "ideology permeates *all* modes of discourse." There is no dearth of scholars today, for example, who find it fascinating to stoke out the insidious political agenda interwoven into the fabric of, say, Jane Austen's novels (a writer who was fortunate enough, Howe contends, not to have to worry about politics in her novels).

Still, what strikes me in re-reading Howe's study is how relevant, how eminently usable, some of his precepts remain as we consider how Jewish-American fiction on Israel has evolved during this century. Consider, for example, Howe's elaboration upon the "ideal" political novel:

The political novel—I have in mind its "ideal" form—is peculiarly a work of internal tensions. To be a novel at all, it must contain the

usual representation of human behavior and feeling; yet it must also absorb into its stream of movement the hard and perhaps insoluble pellets of modern ideology. . . . The conflict is inescapable: the novel tries to confront experience in its immediacy and closeness, while ideology is by its nature general and inclusive. Yet it is precisely from this conflict that the political novel gains its interest and takes on the aura of high drama. (*Politics* 20)

Political novelists, then, must somehow assert their broad, inclusive ideology through (rather than in spite of) the personal, felt life of their protagonists.

We might ponder here how well the Jewish-American novelists, from Meyer Levin to Tova Reich, have balanced this “internal tension” in their work. Every novel in this study, after all, qualifies as a “political” one, certainly by our current paradigm of literary study, and even under Howe’s more exclusive model. To be sure, a writer who engages Israel or other Middle East matters necessarily adopts a “political milieu” as a setting and grapples with “political ideas,” either overtly or tacitly. In regard to Jewish-American fiction on Israel, it is my contention that we can trace a definite progression, or evolution, insofar as the recent authors have balanced the internal tension with greater skill and have engaged Israel with far greater intellectual rigor than their predecessors, Meyer Levin and Leon Uris. This development would not prove so significant if it were not for the intriguing historical circumstances which, at least in part, precipitated the evolution.

The novels of Meyer Levin and Leon Uris, for example, were informed by and have much to tell us about the American pre-Zionist and Zionist phases. In writing their Israel fiction, both Meyer Levin and Leon Uris were driven primarily by their strong ideological convictions concerning both the Middle East and what, in their day, passed for Jewish-American literature in general. Levin self-consciously wrote a Zionist novel in *Yehuda* (1931) both to challenge the pre-Zionist milieu within the Jewish-American community and to assert what he considered to be a sorely needed *Jewish* artistic vision. He thereby challenged, preemptively, what he called the “hidden assimilationist quality” in the work of his most notable literary peers: Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, and Bernard Malamud (Levin, “A Conversation” 40). The lackluster public and critical reception of his early Zionist work and the harsh treatment afforded to him by the Jewish-American intelligentsia at the time

reveals—at least in part—the American Jews’ fierce opposition to the idea of a Jewish state prior to the Holocaust.

Uris, in contrast to Levin, faced a decidedly Zionist milieu when he wrote *Exodus* (1958), but, like Levin, he was driven by his ideological convictions concerning the Middle East and Jewish-American fiction. He wrote *Exodus* to tout the heroism of the Israeli *sabra*, to confirm the maliciousness of the Arab, and to challenge what had emerged by the late 1950s as the archetypal Jewish protagonist in American literature. “*Exodus*,” Uris claims in a prefatory note to the paperback edition, “is about a fighting people,” not about “the cliché Jewish characters who have cluttered up our American fiction.” Lamentably, Uris merely replaced one set of clichés with another. From his canned depiction of the heroic Israeli freedom fighter to his facile demonization of the Arabs, Uris affirmed everything that American Jews wanted so desperately to believe about the Middle East. The overwhelmingly enthusiastic public reception of *Exodus* reveals how eager American Jews were in the wake of the Holocaust to embrace Uris’s image of the stoic, courageous Jew. Who cared that Uris’s portrait was merely an inverse stereotype, one that even Israelis forthrightly disowned? Thirty-five years after the publication of Uris’s novel, the commercial success of Herman Wouk’s *The Hope* (1993)—in which he largely revives Uris’s pulp formula for depicting the Israeli soldier—illustrates that some American Jews (and gentiles) still yearn for images of heroic Israeli soldiers and malicious Arabs.

One need only weigh Levin’s and Uris’s fiction against Howe’s criteria above to isolate the weakness of their efforts. For while Uris and Levin make their own ideological convictions abundantly clear, these “hard pellets of ideology,” as Howe puts it, are not satisfactorily absorbed into a credible depiction of human behavior and feeling. Their failure, like most novelistic failures, can be seen as a failure of expression. *Yehuda*, for example, fails as a novel because its protagonist’s fatty sigh of unqualified Zionist fervor at the end of the novel strains credulity. Given what we know about Yehuda—his individualist aspirations to become a concert violinist and his spiritual longings, neither of which can be fulfilled on the *kibbutz*—it rings false. In the final analysis, Levin refuses to qualify his ideology to conclude the novel, though the experiences of his protagonist, Yehuda, refuse to sustain this broad, inclusive political statement.

In *Exodus*, Uris arguably fashions an even less plausible protagonist in his effort to bolster the comfortable Zionist pieties of his milieu and

to fashion a new, decidedly un-neurotic Jewish character. As Ruth Wisse and others note, Uris's Ari Ben Canaan bears more in common with the stolid heroes of American films set in the Wild West than with Israeli *sabras*. The characters in *Exodus*, one reviewer comments, "stand in roughly the same relation to the reality of Israel as Scarlett O'Hara, Rhett Butler, and Ashley Wilkes do to the American Civil War and Reconstruction South" (Blocker 539). Like Levin, Uris, in deference to his political agenda, fails to filter his ideological convictions through three-dimensional, believable characters. Midge Decter aptly characterizes Uris's fiction as "genuine trash about Jews," insofar as "he has created the possibility of seeing Jews not as the troublesome and incomprehensible heroes that decent social conscience has always demanded but as the kind of heroes that middle-class dream-life has conditioned us all to make our most immediate responses to" ("Popular Jews" 360). Indeed, Uris creates a fantasy through the stolid and tough Ari Ben Canaan—a fantasy that American readers anxiously embraced at the time, but one that earmarks *Exodus* as a novel in which the author cannot (or at least refuses to) express the political through the immediacy and closeness of credible experience.

The Israel fiction of Meyer Levin and Leon Uris, then, fails to achieve a level of "high drama" because the writers cannot reconcile their ideological agenda with the generic demands of the novel. Wouk's recent novel notwithstanding, Uris's *Exodus* distinguishes itself today as the trap that most Jewish-American writers seek to avoid (though the novel does contain significant and overlooked strengths, which I explore in Chapter 3). Fortunately, the succeeding Jewish-American writers on Israel—from Saul Bellow to Tova Reich—have demonstrated a far greater ability to engage the vexing ideological problems swirling about the Middle East through (rather than at the expense of) credible characters. To be sure, this development has a good deal to do with the variance in individual talent between, say, a Levin and a Bellow, a Uris and a Roth. However, as I have already implied, it also has a good bit to do with the historical circumstances surrounding the authors—circumstances that bode well for the future Jewish-American fiction on Israel.

Perhaps the overarching point that I would like to make in this introduction is that the zeitgeist today encourages the surge of quality Jewish-American fiction that we are currently beginning to enjoy, just as the zeitgeist of Levin's and Uris's day discouraged Jewish-American writers from engaging Israel seriously in their work. The Jewish state, I

would argue, needed to establish itself as a viable political reality before it could inspire quality fiction from Jewish-American authors. It needed to outgrow its role as the “transcendent object,” to borrow a phrase from Ted Solotaroff, of the American Jews’ political and spiritual dreams (“The Open Community” xv). Meyer Levin, one must remember, wrote his earlier Israel novels, *Yehuda* and *My Father’s House* (1947), before the establishment of the Jewish state. Israel thus manifests itself in these novels as the dream, the transcendent object, yet to be realized. Leon Uris wrote *Exodus*, of course, after the dream became a reality. But just how long Israel would remain a reality was a matter for debate. Israel would not establish itself as a viable national entity in the Middle East until after its victory in the 1967 Six-Day War. The war, in a very real sense, represented Israel’s moment of reckoning. Israel would either be wiped off the map or it would prevail. Israel, of course, prevailed. Now, given the historical circumstances that faced Levin and Uris, should it really surprise us that these Jewish-American authors refused to qualify their ardent Zionism? Should it surprise us that most other Jewish-American writers, no doubt recognizing the tenuousness of the historical circumstances, refused to even broach the topic of Israel in their fiction? The stakes, one might say, were simply too high for the Jewish-American author to approach the Middle East in all its complexity and moral ambiguousness.

Small wonder that it was only after Israel’s overwhelming victory in the Six-Day War that Hugh Nissenson, in *In the Reign of Peace* (1972), and Saul Bellow, in *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* (1970), were able to eschew Levin’s and Uris’s Zionist pieties to explore the psychological costs of Israeli militarism through less heroic, but ultimately, more human characters. Likewise, Potok was prescient enough in *The Chosen* (1967) to recognize the complications that would beset the American Jewish community after they eschewed messianic Judaism to embrace secular Zionism as a primary source of identity. The more recent works of Philip Roth, Anne Roiphe, and Tova Reich represent a further development of the Jewish-American novel on Israel. Roth takes on the Palestinian problem in both of his Middle East novels while Reich and Roiphe engage the problem of Israel’s gender discrimination. These are novelists who, unlike Uris and Levin, seek out rather than obfuscate, the real, felt moral quandaries of Jewish identity as it plays itself out in Israel. Bellow, Nissenson, Potok, Roth, Roiphe, and Reich: they all write in the thoughtful, critical spirit of true Zionism, or “post-Zionism” (a notable accomplish-

ment for Bellow, Nissenson, and Potok, who addressed Israel in their work during America's most deliriously "Zionist" phase) and explore the central issues that have linked and divided the two Jewish communities: the role of Israel as both safe haven and spiritual core for Jews everywhere pitted against its rampant secularism and spiritual sterility, its militarism, its deference (given Israel's parliamentary government) to the ultra-Orthodox, and its entrenched sexism.

A broad survey of the literature, then, illustrates the complex and varied ways in which American Jews have imagined Israel in their fiction, and the concomitantly dynamic relationship between American Jews and the Jewish state. Our post-Zionist milieu should inspire, I believe, the continued outcropping of sophisticated Jewish-American fictional approaches toward the Middle East. A comprehensive peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors seems more imminent today than impossible. So Jewish-American authors, I suspect, will follow the example of Roth, Roiphe, and Reich to grapple with the issue of Jewish identity against a more tangible Middle East landscape. As Israel evolves as a nation, so does Jewish-American fiction about Israel, and I anticipate that they will both continue to evolve at a rapid rate. But regardless of this changeable nature of the Jewish-American imagination, the very persistence of Israel in occupying that imagination tells us a great deal. Indeed, each of the eight writers illustrates, above all, how prominent a role Israel played and continues to play in forging the Jewish-American identity. Israel, after all, has emerged as the American Jew's favorite preoccupation. A single moment in Philip Roth's latest novel, *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), illustrates how ineluctable this preoccupation truly is for American Jews. The aging protagonist, Mickey Sabbath, does not travel to the Middle East, nor does he give any indication that Israel has ever entered his mind; but when he imagines his own eulogy, the final line reads curiously, "Mr. Sabbath did nothing for Israel" (*ST* 195). Israel, it seems, looms in the consciousness of even the most disaffected American Jews.

In regard to my own Middle East preoccupations, they do manifest themselves throughout the study—subtly in the first few chapters, and more explicitly in the later chapters on Chaim Potok, Philip Roth, and Anne Roiphe. Nonetheless, I would like now to articulate briefly my essential perspective of the Middle East to preclude the reader from rifling through the first chapters in a frustrating search for my political orientation. So, let me say up front that, as a Jew growing up in Los

Angeles in the 1970s (during the zenith of America's Zionist phase), I was brought up to be a Zionist. The Hebrew school I attended could just as well have been named "Israel school," for Holocaust remembrance and Zionism were seared into our consciousness more than aleph, bet, gimmel, and dalet. The suffering of fellow Jews during the Holocaust did not seem a thing of the distant past at all, as we witnessed it three afternoons a week (after "regular" school) at Temple Ramat Zion. The thick European accent of our *morah* [teacher], her occasional fits of sobbing, and her inability to participate in any of our principal's special assemblies dedicated to Holocaust remembrance made us painfully aware that she was a "survivor" and, probably, the only one so fortunate in her family. The message drilled home to us time and time again was that Holocaust remembrance was essential, not only to honor the Jewish victims, but because *it could happen again*.

Here, of course, is where Israel came in. What else did the recent 1973 attack against the Jewish state by its hostile Arab neighbors (launched on Yom Kippur, no less!) signify except that it could happen again? It was up to us to see that the Jews in Israel flourish rather than suffer a second annihilation. Thus, we set out around the neighborhood with our parents and our powder-blue collection cans with the detail of Israel set off in white like an ivory sliver. Our Zionist education was unclouded by the vexing Palestinian problem. The slaughter of six million Jews during the Holocaust made Israel a necessity while the Arabs—a monolithic group who already occupied 99 percent of the Middle East anyway—wished, not unlike Hitler, to wipe the Jews off the face of the earth (my Zionism was so unclouded, in fact, that I was dumbfounded as late as my freshman year in college when a fellow student whose intelligence I admired let on in the college newspaper that his hero was Yasir Arafat, a "freedom fighter who dedicated his life to getting back for the Palestinians what was rightfully theirs").

Today I still consider myself a Zionist. That is, I believe as strongly as ever in Israel's right to exist; and, moreover, I believe that the spiritual and physical condition of Jews everywhere in the Diaspora depends upon Israel's survival. I would only qualify my brand of Zionism in two ways. First, in embracing Zionism, I do not mean to imply that Zionism alone can carry the day as the religion of American Jews. As I hope I make clear in Chapter 6, on Chaim Potok, American Jews need Zionism *and* Judaism. The former, as the dizzying rate of assimilation illustrates (at least in part), has proven a weak substitute for the latter.

Second, like many progressive American Jews today, I have cultivated a healthy dose of skepticism in regard to Israeli policy toward the Palestinians—hence my sensitivity to the way in which Jewish-American writers depict, or refuse to depict, Arab characters in their fiction (see especially Chapter 7, on Philip Roth). Sheer demographics are enough to convince me that Yitzhak Rabin’s Labor party made the right decision when they agreed on the “declaration of principles” with the PLO in 1993, principles that honor the Palestinians’ demand for self-determination, and principles for which Rabin paid the ultimate price. Indeed, the alternative—to continue ruling over an ever-growing minority population with its own distinct history and culture—is an altogether untenable one given the contemporary Middle East landscape. Despite the surge of fundamentalist violence in Israel since the 1993 Israel-PLO accord, I remain hopeful that the Israeli government will persevere and continue on its present course with the Palestinians. While I espouse a more gradual transition to full Palestinian national self-determination than some progressive Jews (especially given the reluctance of the Palestinians to strike the language in their National Covenant that, until recently, called for Israel’s destruction), I look forward to the establishment of a demilitarized Palestinian state in the Middle East in the not too distant future.

Unlike an increasing number of academics, I am under no illusions that this academic study will play a significant role in this political process. I only hope that the study serves as a touchstone through which the reader might engage the past, present, and future Jewish-American fiction on Israel. If my own critical model helps guide readers toward a richer, more historically informed, interpretation of Jewish-American fiction—if it inspires, in the bargain, even a handful of readers to question their own assumptions about the Middle East—it will exceed my wildest expectations.

Chapter 2

MEYER LEVIN AGAINST THE GRAIN

*A Zionist Writer Takes on
America's Pre-Zionist Zeitgeist*

There can be little doubt that in the last ten years we have witnessed a shift in the tide of the American Jewish relationship with Israel. Some observers insist that we now live in a “post-Zionist” milieu, in large part because American Jews so readily come forward today to criticize the state of Israel. Indeed, those in the know would agree that Israel’s incursions into Lebanon in the early 1980s, the Pollard affair, and the Palestinian *intifada* have all claimed a hefty toll on Israel’s PR amid American (and American Jewish) circles. What fewer people realize, however, is that there was a time in America when the very idea of a Jewish state, in the first place, was not a popular one within the American Jewish community. After the Holocaust, of course, American Jews recognized the need for Israel, and the most prominent Jews were roundly admonished if they hesitated to express their new-found Zionism. “Even Ludwig Lewisohn,” Daniel Walden notes, “was criticized by fellow Jews [shortly after the Holocaust], though he early became a Zionist and Judeophile” (“Introduction” 17). But prior to the Shoah, the zeitgeist was decidedly anti-Zionist as the idea of an autonomous Jewish state clashed with Marxist, plain old assimilationist, or religious precepts (see Chapter 6, on Chaim Potok, for a related discussion). As Michael Lerner reminds us, “to be a Zionist in the 1930s and 1940s was *not* to be a part of the American-Jewish establishment” (“The Editor” xxiv).

During this pre-Zionist period in America, Meyer Levin emerged as the most notable and courageous Zionist writer, a writer against the grain of popular American Jewish sentiment. Levin’s own Zionism took

hold, remarkably, in the 1920s (“pretty damn prematurely” as one Levin interviewer observes), after an editor of the *Menorah Journal*—which would shortly become *Commentary*—convinced Levin in 1925 to report for the magazine on the opening of Hebrew University in Jerusalem (Morton 32). While there, he met Golda Meir. Levin asserts that this first trip “made the whole Zionist experience real for me” (Morton 32). Although this first visit lasted only several weeks, the idea of making *aliyah* evidently occupied Levin’s mind; he returned to Israel two years later and spent half a year at the *kibbutz* Yagur near Haifa (Levin, “The Writer” 527). From this experience, he wrote a short story in 1928, “Maurie Finds His Medium,” which details the *aliyah* of an American Jewish artist, and published *Yehuda*, the first significant Zionist novel (in America) in 1931—a time, lest we forget, when “American Jews were generally opposed to the establishment of an independent Jewish homeland in Palestine” (Guttmann 108). Levin produced a Zionist film in 1947, *The Illegals*, about the underground exodus of Polish Holocaust survivors to Palestine. That same year, he published his second Zionist novel, *My Father’s House*, and he would publish an intriguing short story, “After All I Did For Israel,” in 1951.

Levin, of course, went on to publish a voluminous Zionist novel in 1972, *The Settlers*, and a sequel six years later, *The Harvest*. Owing largely to the scope of this chapter, I will not discuss these later novels (published during America’s most fervently Zionist period). The scope of the chapter notwithstanding, however, other Jewish-American writers begin to “imagine” Israel in a more timely and critically astute manner than does the 1970s Levin even before the 1970s, and certainly during that decade (see the following chapters on Saul Bellow, Hugh Nissenson, and Chaim Potok). As Steven J. Rubin notes, “the fiction that Meyer Levin wrote after 1960 . . . does not seem well suited for the sophisticated tastes of the modern reader. . . . Too much of his later fiction appears to be a statement of the author’s view of existence, rather than a rendering of experience” (Rubin 150). Readers interested in *The Settlers* and *The Harvest* might consult Rubin’s adept treatment of these novels in his recent book. While Levin’s later efforts largely fail as fiction, his early fiction on Israel—“Maurie Finds His Medium,” *Yehuda*, *My Father’s House*, and “After All I Did For Israel”—manifest themselves today not only as original and courageous, but also as works of extraordinary vision. For, in these works, Levin anticipates some of the problems that would beset Israel and, concomitantly, anticipates the con-

cerns of Jewish-American writers who would eventually follow his lead to imagine Israel in their fiction.

One cannot fully appreciate the courage of Levin's early Zionist fiction without considering the scorn Levin thereby provoked from the ranks of the Jewish literary left. That Meyer Levin was ostracized from this epicenter of Jewish literary culture is no secret. Levin would bemoan the "anti-Levin conspiracy" and blast back throughout his career at the more popular writers who he believed were responsible for the "silent treatment." The holy triumvirate in Jewish-American literature—Bellow, Roth, and Malamud—were really "anti-Jewish" as far as Levin was concerned (Levin, "A Conversation" 39). In numerous interviews, Levin attacks the "hidden assimilationist quality in their work" and suggests that these most lauded Jewish writers, ironically, "don't know a thing about [the Jewish community]" ("A Conversation" 40). As recently as 1978, Levin insists that Bellow, Roth, and Malamud (and Irving Howe, as well) "are totally detached from the living Jewish community" (Morton 33). In the introduction to *The Rise of American Jewish Literature*, which Levin co-edited with Charles Angoff, Levin takes the opportunity to castigate Bellow, Roth, and Malamud once again. Discussing the "rise" of the three writers, Levin and Angoff comment, "Was this literary trend a valid interpretation of postwar Jewish psychology, or was it leading Jews to assimilation by—purposively or not—omitting the inner continuation as well as the creative and identifying activities in Jewish life?" (14).

Several critics, such as Benno Weiser Varon, Pearl Bell, and Harold Ribalow, explore the antipathies running both ways between Levin and the left-wing *Partisan Review* crowd, which included the eminent likes of Saul Bellow and Irving Howe (see also Lawrence Graver's recent study, *An Obsession with Anne Frank: Meyer Levin and the Diary*, for his detailed discussion of Levin's tumultuous relationship with the Jewish literary left). What demands emphasis today, however, is the extent to which Levin's unpopular Zionist vision, specifically, accounted for his ostracism from the Jewish literary left during the pre-Zionist period of the 1930s and 40s. For Levin's less valid complaints of the "literary mafia" during the 1970s—in the wake of his unsuccessful Zionist novels, *The Settlers* and *The Harvest*—tends to obscure the validity of his similar complaints in the 1930s and 40s. Pearl Bell, for example, can make a convincing case, in reviewing *The Harvest*, that "it is not just Levin's stubborn dedication 'to the Jewish life around me and to Jewish

problems,' as he claims, that has kept him out of the pantheon of American Jewish writing" (68). Indeed, one must agree with Bell that anti-Levin "conspiracies" had little to do with the disappointing reception of Levin's 1970s Zionist novels; they were published, after all, during America's most Zionist period to date. Rather, owing largely to their overblown sentimentality (or perhaps their "sententious banality," as Bell puts it), these 1970s novels simply fail as art.

That said, one should not assume—as does Bell—that the Zionist Levin during the 1930s and 40s suffered merely the legitimate, artistic critiques of the 1970s Levin. Enough evidence exists today to conclude that the Jewish literary left judged Levin's early Zionist fiction largely on political, not artistic, grounds (and, yes, I count myself among those who insist that, although they are inextricably connected, certain distinctions can be drawn between art and politics). In Benno Weiser Varon's "The Haunting of Meyer Levin," he convincingly affirms that Levin was, indeed, "singled out for attack because of his consistent pro-Zionism sometimes by one Marxist clique, sometimes by another . . ." (13). Varon strays occasionally to offer unreliable, anecdotal evidence of the anti-Levin conspiracy, and performs overly generous, sentimental readings of Levin's work. However, Varon also effectively renders the anti-Zionist milieu of the 1930s and 40s. He quotes Norman Podhoretz's *Making It* to emphasize that "As good Marxists, they [the Jewish literary left of the *Partisan Review*] regarded Zionism as yet another form of bourgeois nationalism . . ." (16). What is more, Varon convincingly argues that the literary left did, predictably, "haunt" Levin, who courageously produced Zionist fiction during this period.

Case in point, Bellow's introduction to the first edition of *Great Jewish Short Stories* (1963). Bellow predictably excludes Levin from the anthology (not, in itself, proof of anything), but also blatantly misreads Levin's 1928 story, "Maurie Finds His Medium," to castigate Levin for his skewed artistic sensibilities. The story revolves around a foundering Jewish-American writer who decides, all too conveniently, that his alienation from his Jewish roots causes his artistic failure in America. He thus takes off for Palestine, where he discovers that painting offers him the artistic language through which to express his Jewish identity. Or so he thinks. Importantly, Levin concludes the story by making it clear that Maurie's art, in a word, stinks. He paints "hackneyed, common repetitions of landscapes and Arab heads, banal . . ." (Levin, "Maurie" 181). Varon aptly notes that "Levin obviously uses [Maurie] as a caricature for

many a self-styled ‘artist’” (14). Clearly, then, one should not confuse Maurie with Levin. But Bellow does precisely this as he assumes that Levin shares Maurie’s artistic precepts:

A curious surrender to xenophobia is concealed in this theorizing about art, and I am sure that Mr. Levin would not like to be identified with Oswald Spengler who is . . . an exponent of views of this sort. According to Spengler, the Jews are permanently identified with a period of culture he calls the Magian, and will never belong to modern order. . . . Theories like Mr. Levin’s about the “perfect unit of time and place” seldom bring any art into the world. . . . (“Introduction” 15)

In subsequent editions of *Great Jewish Short Stories*, Bellow’s editors persuaded him (after Levin’s justifiable complaints) to revise the above passage to read, “Theories like those expressed by Mr. Levin’s character . . . seldom bring any art into the world” [emphasis mine] (Bellow, “Introduction” 15). Now, Bellow is nothing if not an astute and canny reader, one eminently familiar with T. S. Eliot’s dictum about narrative voice. So why does he insist upon reading Maurie’s narrow artistic precepts as Levin’s own? Most likely because Bellow viewed Levin’s early Zionism (the one thing the author does share with his protagonist) as the pernicious influence responsible for Maurie’s skewed vision of art. Put another way, because Levin is a Zionist, he must share his Zionist character’s “xenophobic” artistic views. Steven Rubin also suggests that “Saul Bellow’s harsh judgment of Levin as ‘xenophobic’ in his introduction to the first Dell edition of *Great Jewish Short Stories* (1963), serves to illustrate the general disregard for Levin’s Zionist views” (149). Ironically, Bellow and most of his anti-Zionist (*ergo*, anti-Levin) cohorts would adopt Levin’s Zionism shortly after the horrors in Europe gained full clarity, and Bellow would eventually insist upon the importance of Israel in his fiction and non-fiction (see Chapter 4). As Varon insists, “Levin’s crime consisted in becoming a Zionist ‘too soon’” (17).

Bellow’s myopic reading of “Maurie Finds His Medium” serves as an instructive starting point at which to assess the courage and vision of Levin’s early Zionist fiction. One can glean from Bellow’s critique of the story both how Levin’s early Zionist fiction has been received in the past and how it should be reinterpreted today. For Bellow’s aversion toward Levin’s early Zionism prevents him from recognizing Levin’s foresight in “Maurie Finds His Medium.” So intent is Bellow upon seeing Levin

as Maurie that he refuses to see that Levin uses his protagonist to predict just what type of American Jew the future state of Israel will likely attract. Though Israel will desperately need able-bodied men and women to build up the Jewish state, Levin suggests (through his creation of Maurie) that the prospect of making *aliyah* will more likely appeal to the maladjusted, alienated American Jew.

To be sure, the past several years bear out Levin's 1928 prediction. As Thomas Friedman recently observed, the majority of Americans making *aliyah* today do not move to Israel to strengthen the state, but to salvage their own flagging spirituality; they join the yeshiva, not the *kibbutz*. At one such yeshiva, Friedman asks a group of these new Israelis, "What are you doing here? . . . You're not supposed to be in a yeshiva. That's not why Americans come here. . . . You're supposed to be on kibbutzim, draining swamps, dreaming about being an Israeli fighter pilot . . ." (303). Levin envisions the onslaught of these new Israelis in "Maurie Finds His Medium." Moreover, he anticipates the creations of later Jewish-American writers who imagine Israel. The characters who make *aliyah* in Philip Roth's *The Counterlife* (1986), Anne Roiphe's *Lovingkindness* (1987), and Tova Reich's *Master of the Return* (1988) (see Chapters 7–9) share Maurie's disillusionment with the shallowness of Jewish life in America. Like Maurie, they move to Israel to reclaim their religious roots, and the secular state of Israel just might be better off without any of them.

Levin would go on to publish the first significant Zionist novel in America, *Yehuda*, three years later, in 1931. The novel revolves principally around a *kibbutz*nik, Yehuda, who struggles throughout the novel to reconcile his socialist ideals with his individualist aspirations to become a concert violinist. Not many people were buying books during the Depression, and the novel sold only about 3,000 copies. Regardless of the Depression, however, the subject matter and title of the book probably turned off some potential readers (Rubin 25). *Yehuda's* poor reception greatly disappointed Levin, who "expected to be launched as a Jewish writer of significance to my fellow Jews" (Levin, "The Writer" 527). Levin reflects that "when *Yehuda* appeared and touched off no response in the American Jewish community, I was left rather suspended. The lack of a responsive audience was as frustrating as the dearth of royalties" ("The Writer" 527). The novel did garner sympathetic reviews (see Lechlitner, Ehrlich, Trilling, and "A Zionist Colony"); however, the few critics who have addressed the novel more recently

generally consider it a melodramatic Zionist novel, to its detriment. Bell dismisses *Yehuda* as a “sentimental tale” (66), while Guttman characterizes the protagonist, Yehuda, as an “improbable man” (109).

Given the anti-Zionist mood in America, *Yehuda* would have been a courageous work even if it were merely “an optimistic and generally positive view of settlement life and the Zionist ideal” (Rubin 144). And the overall structure of the novel gives one good reason to interpret *Yehuda* in these terms. Levin takes pains to depict the idyllic Palestine that Yehuda and the other members of his *kibbutz* enjoy. The novel opens as Yehuda finishes a satisfying day of work in the fields and pauses to gaze, in awe, upon the majestic land—*his* land, Levin suggests. A great, almost ineffable joy often overcomes Yehuda while he works in the fields alongside his comrades. Levin, for example, describes Yehuda’s happiness as he observes the progress of Sholom: “This was one of his comrades. Together they would bring about a new life, a new life!” (Y 162). Yehuda and his friends often burst into song, “The nation Israel lives! The soul of Israel lives!” (Y 356). Though Yehuda’s ambition to gain worldwide acclaim as a concert musician dogs him throughout the story, he resolutely chooses the plow over the violin by the end of the novel. Yehuda gets his chance to prove his talent when the esteemed violinist, Yussuf Brenner, travels to the *kibbutz* to perform. However, Brenner’s arrogance convinces Yehuda that he will play only for his comrades and, we are to believe, this will be enough:

In the hot midafternoon Yehuda looked out over the plain. Never before had the clean air so joyously filled his body. He felt air vibrate within him, as it must vibrate in a songfilled violin. The whole plain danced in the white afternoon heat, wavered and beat under the glow of the sun. . . . After a while he would go down to the cabin and get his violin, and play his music. (Y 374)

There can be little doubt that Levin intends the reader to frolic in the Zionist current. That said, I would argue that the strength of *Yehuda* does not lie in its melodrama, but in Levin’s perspicacious dramatization of the problems that beset the very first Israeli *kibbutzim* and continue to plague the increasingly unpopular *kibbutz* system today. To Levin’s credit, several details of novel do *not* support the affirmative ending above.

First, several episodes in the novel indicate that the socialist ideals of a *kibbutz* cannot be so easily reconciled with individualist aspira-

tions. Levin, to be sure, would like the reader to believe that *kibbutz* life harmonizes with and enhances Yehuda's individual talent. In one scene, Yehuda sees his comrades as fellow musicians who accompany him: "Rambam is a cello. Feldman, here, a deep trombone, pump-pum-pum. And Zahavey a fiddle that screeches and squeaks . . ." (Y 19). But an overwhelming number of details illustrate that the communal life stifles Yehuda's talent, a talent he must realize to gain fulfillment. He bemoans the severe limits on his practice time and must acknowledge the "strange stifling death that surrounded his music here" (Y 82). When an American Jew, Mr. Paley, visits the *kibbutz* and encourages Yehuda to pursue his artistic aspirations, Yehuda hopes that Paley will "pluck him from this place" (Y 120). Yehuda attempts to rationalize his dream by convincing himself of his altruistic motives; he resolves to send the bulk of his earnings back to the commune and reflects, "Such a comrade would be worth more to the commune than twenty pairs of hands on the farm!" (Y 157). However, the prospect of personal fame, not of helping the commune, invades Yehuda's dreams. He envisions himself "on the stage of some vast auditorium the walls of which were festooned with inconceivable elegancies, the pillars of which shone gold" (Y 171). Yehuda wishes he were like Sholom, unselfishly idealistic and "good" to the core. "To him," muses Yehuda, "ideals did not seem manners intellectually adopted, in him ideals flowed as some sweet substance in the blood" (Y 127). What one realizes, however (despite Levin's contrived ending), is that Yehuda cannot be like Sholom. He possesses great ambition which cannot—and probably should not—be stifled.

In addition to this main plot of the novel, Levin constructs several subplots to emphasize the often irreconcilable tension between individual aspiration and the socialist ideal. Relying so heavily upon others proves more than several characters can bear. Weary of the plodding inefficiency of communal farming, Aryay aspires to succeed on his own as a farmer: "One day . . . he would do what he wanted to do. He would go out and *be for himself*. That was what he was yearning for: *his own* small fields to fence around and to tend perfectly so they were cleanly sown in neat rows . . ." [emphasis mine] (Y 143). The socialist ban on private property turns one character, Sonya, into an irrepressible kleptomaniac. Before the novel ends, she makes off with a whistle and a fountain pen, and artlessly sells the commune's chickens to buy herself silk stockings (a bourgeois, capitalist symbol if there ever was one).

Although the *kibbutz* members ostracize Sonya for her behavior and, ultimately, impel her to leave the commune, several of her friends realize the validity of her individual needs. Says Yehudit, “Well, what if a girl wants silk stockings—!” (Y 249). Levin’s Mr. Paley, an American Jewish visitor to Yehuda’s *kibbutz*, also recognizes the pragmatic shortcomings of the socialist dream. He muses that this dream of “building the land of Israel . . . was one of those romantic dreams people dreamed. It was all right to live like a lumber jack for a few months sleeping on a cot in a shack and eating meals off tin plates on a raw wooden table, but after all what was civilization for if not to enjoy the fruits of it . . .” (Y 164).

Through the case of Yehuda and his violin, Aryay and his envisioned fields, Sonya and her stockings, and Paley’s prescient observations, Levin anticipates the serious tensions between communalism and individualism that would take its toll on the *kibbutzim* in Israel. Today, no one would dispute that—while Israelis might laud the communal ideals of the first Jewish settlers in Palestine—individualism is the order of the day in the Jewish state. As one Israeli recently observed:

Ideology brought Jews here; ideology also denigrated shopkeepers and praised those who went out to settle the land. It glorified not the rugged individual, but the rugged group—the commune, the underground, the army unit, the nation. . . . Today, forty-six years after its founding, Israel is like an ex-revolutionary shopping in the mall. Individualism and the desire for personal comfort, no longer weaknesses, quietly have become values. (Gorenberg 20)

Incredibly, Levin recognizes and dramatizes this individualist spirit which percolated even in the heyday, so to speak, of Palestine’s communal phase. He anticipates (though unintentionally, perhaps) the contemporary, individualist ethos of the Israeli. To be sure, Levin’s Sonya would be right at home in the shopping malls of Israel today.

Certainly, the irrepressible individualist urges of several Israeli *kibbutzniks* would not emerge as the only weakness of the *kibbutzim*. For the socialist credo of Israel’s communes stifled not only individualist expression, but religious expression as well; socialism, in effect, became the religion on the *kibbutz*, thus replacing Judaism. This element of the *kibbutz* system has proven a shortcoming, as a number of members of *kibbutzim*—alienated from their Jewish roots—have abandoned their respective communes to reclaim the religious element of their identity. Hugh Nissenson, in *Notes from the Frontier* (1968), and Tova Reich, in

Master of the Return (1988), address this weakness of the Israeli *kibbutz* (see Chapters 4 and 8). Remarkably, however, Levin engages this religious weakness of the *kibbutzim* as early as 1931 in *Yehuda*.

Levin addresses the tension between religion and socialism through creating a Chasidic commune close by Yehuda's (more common) socialist *kibbutz*. Yehuda's love interest throughout the novel, Yocheved, lives at this religious commune and her religious precepts raise Yehuda's socialist hackles. He wishes to shake Yocheved out of her "archaic" religious convictions:

We are socialists! Do you understand what that means! Have you ever read the books of Karl Marx! It seems you never even heard of him! . . . Here in our new land, we must find a new way of living. We must live as brothers. We must do away with exploitation. We must make everything perfect. See, everyone will work! Everyone will be equal. The teacher, and the ploughman, and the book-keeper, and the stableman, all will know how to work. (Y 43)

Yehuda, indeed, is nothing if not a good socialist. And one might be tempted here to see little narrative distance between Levin and his protagonist. After all, the novel ends in fatty affirmation of these socialist precepts as Yehuda looks forward to working the fields the next day with his comrade, Pinsker. However, just as several details suggest that Yehuda's individualist, musical ambitions will not be as easily suppressed as Levin insists in the concluding pages, several details also undermine Levin's ultimate affirmation of the irreligious, socialist ethos.

While Yehuda can exhort Yocheved, until blue in the face, regarding socialism's timeliness and, conversely, Judaism's obsolescence, the Sabbath rituals Yocheved's family observes provoke Yehuda's unwelcome nostalgia for his previous, religious life. Yocheved's preparation of the Sabbath cakes, for example, reminds him of his loving, religious childhood home: "These were the cookies that Yehuda very much liked, for his mother had made them and given them to him every Friday night and Sabbath day, but since his going away from home he had not seen or tasted them. . . . their taste immeasurably gladdened him" (Y 133–134). Later, Yehuda visits Yocheved's commune during their celebration of *Simchas Torah*, the Jewish holiday celebrating God's law. As Yocheved's father fervently sings in celebration of God's gift of the Torah (the Law), Yehuda must admit that religion possesses an enduring time-

liness all its own: “The song of the old man seemed to say, here is my principle, that is all the principle one needs” (Y 206). Yehuda, significantly, cannot resist singing along with Yocheved and her father.

Now, one might argue that Yehuda’s nostalgia for a certain food and song does not indicate his longing for religion; Yehuda does not, at any rate, long for religion at the end of the novel. But, regardless of Levin’s contrived ending, one cannot separate the above food and song from their religious associations. The religious significance of the *Simchas Torah* song, of course, speaks for itself; Yehuda affirms the principle of God’s law when he sings along with Yocheved and her father. In regard to the Sabbath cakes, Yehuda does not so much long for their flavor as he longs for the mother-love, embodied in those pastries that he enjoyed as a member of a traditionally religious family. In stressing the childrens’ communal upbringing at Yehuda’s *kibbutz*, Levin implies that the socialist precepts of the commune do not afford them the close-knit family life Yehuda cherishes in retrospect. Yehuda insists to Yocheved at one point that his *kibbutz* “set[s] aside” the “foolishness of religion,” but “respect[s] the sincere devotion of our fathers” (Y 233). What the above details suggest, however, is that Judaism has far more to offer its adherents than “foolishness” and that a mere “respect” from those fortunate enough to realize this will not be enough, in the long run, to quell the religious stirrings of several *kibbutzniks*.

Levin details several other complications of *kibbutz* life which deserve brief mention because Levin’s sentimental moments, unfortunately, garner more attention today than his realistic dramatization of Jewish life in Palestine/Israel. Levin, for example, faithfully depicts the almost incessant infighting that the socialist system of communal rule invites. Members of the *kibbutz* fight over nearly everything: whether or not it would be against principle to hire outside workers during the busy harvest, whether they should buy a new motor to work the water pump or fix the old one, whether two, three, or ten women should watch the children during the day, whether or not they should send some men to work in a nearby factory to earn money . . . the list goes on and on. Amid such squabbling, one wonders that anything ever gets accomplished at the *kibbutz*.

Levin also dramatizes the tensions between Yehuda’s commune and neighboring Arabs—tensions that, of course, continue today between the Jewish state and surrounding Arab states. Illustrative of the sharp divide between the two cultures, Levin depicts an Arab donkey-path to

Haifa which “crossed through [Yocheved’s] fields, and then went on through the fields of the commune. The path was like a long needle stuck through both stretches of land” (Y42). The imagery scarcely needs elaboration. Arab and Jew, Levin suggests, intersect violently with one another in Palestine. Indeed, Arab raids and Jewish counter-raids, one learns, are simply a fact of life in the Middle East. Levin, interestingly, exposes the fruitlessness of such antagonism during one episode when the men of the commune take their only vehicle to attack neighboring Arabs. While the vehicle is gone, a pregnant member of the *kibbutz*, Aviva, loses her baby in delivery because she cannot reach the hospital.

Levin’s dramatization in *Yehuda* of the problems that plagued even the earliest *kibbutzim*—heretofore largely neglected—does not render the novel any less a Zionist text. Rather, his serious scrutiny of the *kibbutz* system (marred only occasionally by sentimental affirmation) actually qualifies the novel as a Zionist text—that is, if we are to understand Zionism as a genuine commitment to Israel’s political and spiritual condition (Polish 261). This important point deserves clarification, as casual readers of Levin’s early Zionist literature often read his novels as “uncritically Zionist.” A truer understanding of Zionism exposes the above quotation as the oxymoron it is, as Zionism—at its very core—is a critical and fluid orientation of inquiry. As I stated in the introduction to this study, a leading Jewish magazine, *Midstream*, aptly defines Zionism as “a questioning of the Jewish *status quo*, and a steady confrontation of the problems of Jewish existence.” Levin’s *Yehuda*, then, deserves recognition as the first significant American Zionist novel not merely for its portrayal of Palestine as a viable alternative to Jewish life in the Diaspora, but for Levin’s visionary, even prophetic, account of the troubles lurking beneath the idyllic exterior of Palestine’s earliest *kibbutzim*.

After the disappointment of *Yehuda*, Levin focused his creative energies upon American Jewish life and published his most popular novel, *The Old Bunch*, in 1937. Palestine would remain on his mind, however, and he returned there for a third visit just after the publication of *The Old Bunch*. During World War II, Levin worked as a war correspondent for the Overseas News Agency and the Jewish Telegraphic Agency. Just after the war, Levin described his chief duties as a correspondent:

[M]y chief assignment was to write about Jews in battle, and surviving Jews in Europe. In the last weeks of the war, I chased up and down

the entire European front, trying to reach each concentration camp as our armies approached it. I became saturated with the tales of the survivors . . . (“The Writer” 529)

A fellow correspondent later noted Levin’s fascination with the horrific accounts of the Holocaust survivors (see Gendel). The plight of these survivors reinforced Levin’s Zionist convictions and Palestine once again demanded his artistic attention. He thus published his second Zionist novel, *My Father’s House*, just after the Holocaust in 1947 (and, oddly, after the story’s film version, as well). The novel revolves around a group of Holocaust survivors who heroically defy the British blockade and reach Palestine by boat to make a new life for themselves. Levin focuses, specifically, upon one young survivor, David (or Daavid), who clings to the belief that his father somehow also survived the Holocaust to meet him (as he promised) in Palestine. The child scours great expanses of Palestine in his stubborn effort to locate his father.

Given the highly emotional inspiration behind the novel—Levin’s firsthand contact with Holocaust survivors—and the startlingly brief period of time between inspiration and artistic product, one should not be surprised that *My Father’s House* suffers from melodrama and sentimentality even more than *Yehuda*. One of the novel’s few reviewers notes the fairy-tale atmosphere of the book and likens the commune where the Holocaust survivors settle to a Girl Scout camp (see Bullock). Guttmann more recently dismisses the novel as a “tenuously allegorical book about a juvenile refugee sentimentiously welcomed home to Israel, the House of his Father” (109). Rubin also concedes that, “Taken literally, Levin’s view of Palestine and the Jews who have arrived to claim the land of their fathers is too joyful, too idealistic, and too enthusiastic to approach reality” (68).

Like *Yehuda*, Levin’s second Zionist novel, on the surface, cries out for such criticism. While Levin thankfully resists the temptation to allow David to find his father alive in Palestine, he manipulates the plot in other melodramatic ways so that it conforms neatly (alas, too neatly) to his vision of Palestine as a vehicle for Jewish regeneration and rebirth after the horrors of Europe. I will not recount the plot in its entirety (one might refer to Rubin for a close reading). Rather, a few details will suffice to illustrate the melodramatic shortcomings of the novel. One can pretty much glean the tenor of the novel during the first episode, as David and fellow Holocaust survivors successfully reach Palestine’s shore aboard

the *Hannah Szenesch*. When they near the shore, one Jewish member of the crew knows it because “He can feel the shore. He is from here” (*MFH* 7). Levin insists upon this spiritual connection between Jews and Palestine throughout the novel. He, for example, depicts communal life there as an idyllic fulfillment of biblical prophecy. One comrade of *Makor Gallil* tells David and the other new arrivals, “Everything comrades . . . the milk, the honey, everything, just as it says in the Torah. It flows” (*MFH* 37). Another leader of the *kibbutz* tells them that

They were all needed in Palestine, all, there was work for everyone, builders were needed, and cobblers, machinists, electricians, farm workers, and teachers. Here in the settlement, he said, they would learn to speak Hebrew; those who already spoke a little would learn more. And they could remain, and find their places, and be at home. (*MFH* 37)

David’s search for his father also unfolds sentimentally. When he first runs away from *Makor Gallil*, he does so with his young Arab friend, a donkey, and a flute. The scene, of course, smacks of Spenserian allegory; Levin urges the reader to interpret David’s journey as a symbolic quest of the Jewish son to locate his roots (his father) in Palestine. This first attempt must end after the donkey unexpectedly gives birth to a foal. The Arab boy gives David the foal to keep at the *kibbutz*, but David must return the foal to his mother as it refuses to eat. Levin’s message is clear. David, like the foal, needs nurturing. Consequently, he escapes from an orphanage (the members of the *kibbutz* decide that David should stay there for at least a short time) to seek out his father once again. On the road, friendly Jews and Arabs alike assist him. David finally makes his way to Jerusalem and the Search Bureau for Missing Relatives. There, a small yellow book lists survivors and huge stacks of boxes list those who perished in Europe; David, of course, discovers that his whole family was murdered during the Holocaust.

The shocking revelation provokes David’s psychological regression to infancy, but Levin, of course, insists by the end of the novel that David (and other survivors) can be reborn in Palestine. The love that surrounds one survivor, Miriam, at the *kibbutz* finally pierces her protective shell late in the book. As several comrades rejoice in a circle of song upon the birth of their new youth settlement, “The circle carried [Miriam], forced her into its swing. . . . Her arms were intertwined, and she scarcely knew who was on one side of her and who on the other. Then

the words were coming from her, too, joined with all the others" (*MFH* 187). For his part, David's rebirth occurs once Avram (improbably) uncovers a rock in the fields with David's family name, Halevi, inscribed upon it. The rock proves to David that he has, indeed, reached the house of his father and he can begin his regeneration: "David knelt and touched the stone. He traced out the letters—Ha-le-vi. . . 'That was the name of my real father,' Daavid said. . . He had found all of his fathers, in their place" (*MFH* 192).

My Father's House would deserve critical attention based even upon the above superficial reading. David's very predicament, all too common in the wake of the Holocaust, makes Levin's novel the first significant Jewish-American work to argue convincingly for the pragmatic necessity of a Jewish state, given the dispossessed and psychologically scarred survivors of the Holocaust. Several of the details (the orphanage for child survivors, the sparse list of living relatives at the Search Bureau, etc.) strengthen Levin's Zionist argument—an argument that Leon Uris does not make until twelve years later when he fashions another group of Holocaust survivors who defy the British blockade to reach Palestine on an old fishing boat (see Chapter 3).

The greater strength of *My Father's House*, however, lies in its more realistic moments when Levin suggests just how deep the Holocaust survivors' psychological scars lie. For just as *Yehuda's* unrealistic, optimistic ending detracts from the more insightful elements of the novel, the affirmative conclusion of Levin's second Zionist novel, unfortunately, overshadows Levin's more discerning moments in the text. Levin suggests, early on, that Holocaust survivors will not so easily be able to begin a new life in Palestine. During the first episode in the novel, David learns that the ship they are on had a different name when it was an Italian fishing boat. He wonders, "if the ship could really have been changed from the *Guisseppa* to the *Hannah Szenesch*. For it was like people who carried false cards with false names. Marta [Miriam] said they remained the same" (*MFH* 10). David's casual thought takes on a greater significance after it becomes clear that he and his comrades are expected to change their names, too, once they reach Palestine. The new names signify, of course, a new identity for the Jewish survivors—one of strength, not victimhood. However, as Nahama encourages Marta/Miriam to change her name, David's earlier questions on the subject spring to mind: can one so easily assume another identity? Erase the past? Begin afresh? Just as David suspects that the Italian fishing boat will always be an Italian fish-

ing boat, one suspects that Holocaust survivors, like David, will not be able to eschew their past as easily as they can shed their names.

Despite the affirmative ending in which Levin insists that such new beginnings are possible, much of the novel suggests otherwise. Levin suggests that Jewish suffering will likely persist as David encounters a group of Jewish children reenacting the biblical Purim story. The children sing, "Haman, Haman, hang him high, / Fifty cubits in the sky, / He said all the Jews should die! / Save us, Esther, Mordecai!" (*MFH* 160). Through the parallels between the Purim story and the Holocaust, Levin implies that the Holocaust cannot be viewed as an isolated event that can be left behind, but must be seen as part of the continual cycle of Jewish persecution. Moreover, in an earlier episode, Levin insists overtly upon the "presence" of the Holocaust in Palestine. On David's way to the orphanage, he spots a concentration camp, British-style:

[T]hey came to a concentration camp. It was on the right side of the road. It was exactly the same as in Europe, with barbed wire and a tower, where he could see soldiers and machine guns, and there was a gate, with guards and pillboxes and machine-gun slits, and inside there were rows of barracks. The truck stopped. For a moment a terrible panic came over Daavid, a fear that they were bringing him here to give him over to this place. (*MFH* 101)

On one level, Levin offers here an accurate account of the British detention camps in Palestine, which surely would remind any Holocaust survivor of the Nazi concentration camps. Read on a more symbolic level, the scene implies that David and his fellow survivors cannot simply start over in Palestine; they cannot leave the concentration camps behind. The camps follow them to Palestine.

Additional details suggest that the concentration camps will dog the Holocaust survivors psychologically, if not physically. How readily, one might ask, will David shed his survivor guilt as one of the only children of Auschwitz to live? Will he ever forget the Nazi corporal's challenge to him, "With what will you clean my boots, little Yid? . . . With your tongue, you'll polish them!" (*Y* 55)? Miriam's story also causes one to question her dubious regeneration at the end of the novel. Her husband and child were both murdered at Auschwitz. One wonders how she managed to survive until she tells David that the Nazis allowed her to keep her hair; we then suspect, and additional details confirm, that she survived because the Nazis used her as a prostitute. Ultimately, these

realistic depictions, as early as 1947, of the physical and psychological ravages of the Holocaust and the consequent necessity for a Jewish state make *My Father's House* a noteworthy Jewish-American Zionist novel.

Levin's 1951 short story, "After All I Did for Israel," rounds out Levin's early Zionist fiction and—like "Maurie Finds His Medium," *Yehuda*, and *My Father's House*—the story demonstrates convincingly how Levin anticipates the artistic concerns of Jewish-American writers who "imagine" Israel today. Levin strips the story of the melodramatic and sentimental elements that weaken the two novels. Four years after its publication in *Commentary*, Ribalow lauded the story as "the only 'unromantic' tale in a rather meager but interesting list of stories about Zionism or Israel" ("Zion" 573). The story revolves around a philanthropic Jewish narrator who, like several assimilated American Jews of the time, harbors no deep Zionist convictions but, nonetheless, gives generously to the state of Israel. Levin puts his insider status as an American Jew to good use as his narrator conveys deliciously the predicament of wealthy Jews in America: "I give my share and more than my share anyway to the UJA and the Talmud Torah and all the appeals they've got—they tell you there's going to be only one campaign but every week there's another special appeal for a secret submarine or for some Kistadrut outfit or the Hebrew University, and you've got to give, or you're on the spot in the community" ("After" 57). The passage brings to mind Albert Vorspan's observation that a Jew must "enter an FBI Witness Relocation Program and adopt a new identity" to "disassociate effectively" from Jewish fundraising campaigns (31). Indeed, though the narrator wonders "if we really need them in Israel," he donates generous sums of money to the state since American Jewish fund-raisers effectively convince him of his obligation toward his fellow Jews ("After" 58).

The story ends with a dramatic twist when the narrator receives his comeuppance for his detachment from Israel; his son, Mickey, decides to reject his comfortable materialistic life in America and move to Israel instead to build up the newly founded Jewish state. The narrator reasons with his son, "we're Americans. We have Israel now just like the Irish have Ireland—but how many Irish kids want to go to Ireland to raise potatoes?" ("After" 62). Such reasoning, predictably, fails to convince Mickey to remain in America. The narrator laments, "My own son isn't interested in our life any more. . . . After all I did for Israel, this is how I get paid for it" ("After" 62). The story evokes a number of scathing quips like, "A Zionist is someone who believes that *other* Jews should have the right to live

in Israel” and “American Jews will do anything for Israel, except live there.” For Levin uses the story to dramatize both the complacency of most American Jews in regard to Israel and the alienation from Judaism that such complacency signifies. Moreover, as I suggest above, Levin’s depiction of his narrator’s detachment from Israel anticipates the concerns of Jewish-American writers today. In recent novels by Philip Roth and Anne Roiphe, assimilated American Jews (like Levin’s narrator) plead with their more Zionist loved ones (like the narrator’s son) to reconsider their “misguided” decision to make *aliyah* (see Chapters 6 and 7).

It is regrettable that Meyer Levin’s squabbles with the Jewish-American literary establishment garner more attention today than his courageous and incisive early Zionist fiction. Not only did Levin take on a decidedly anti-Zionist milieu when he obdurately wrote this fiction, but he envisioned and dramatized several of the tensions that continue to divide American and Israeli Jews: individualism versus communalism, assimilation versus cultural confidence, materialism versus socialism. He also anticipated the problems that would plague Israelis, specifically: the waning of religion, the enmity of neighboring Arabs, the nagging torment of the Holocaust. Jewish-American writers who engage these tensions today owe Levin a great debt. Levin, for his part, always hoped that his cohorts would eventually follow his lead to write about Israel and about other topics from a distinctively Jewish consciousness. In 1978, just a few years before his death, Levin predicted that “The coming generation of American-Jewish writers . . . will be young writers who will have been to Israel or will be involved with the revival of Jewish studies. They will be trying to see themselves in the light of this material as real Jews” (Levin, “A Conversation” 40). The surge today in the number of young, distinctively Jewish writers (writers like Tova Reich and Anne Roiphe, whom I discuss later, and others like Pearl Abraham, Steve Stern, Allegra Goodman, Melvin Jules Bukiet, Curt Leviant, and Rebecca Goldstein) bears out Levin’s hopeful prediction. In her introduction to the most recent anthology of American Jewish literature, Nessa Rapoport heralds in the arrival of a “Jewishly educated and culturally confident” generation of Jewish-American writers (xxix), and Ted Solotaroff (in his separate introduction) notes the surge in Jewish-American fiction set against an Israeli background. So while it was Levin’s sad fate to stand against the grain of the American Jewish literary zeitgeist, he would no doubt take comfort today that his fellow writers have, finally, come around.

Chapter 7

PHILIP ROTH'S NERVE IN *THE COUNTERLIFE* AND *OPERATION SHYLOCK*: A CONFESSION

*“Jewish Mischief” and
the Post-Colonial Critique*

In literary (i.e., canonical) terms, Philip Roth is far and away a more established Jewish-American writer than Chaim Potok (Saul Bellow once quipped that Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud, and he were the Hart, Schaffner, and Marx of Jewish-American fiction). Still, Roth has also been the target of numerous attacks from Jewish-American intellectuals and lay people who take exception to his “distorted” depiction of American Jewish life. From synagogue pulpits, in articles, in letters to magazines that publish Roth’s stories and to Roth himself, his critics have accused him of no less than self-hatred and anti-Semitism. The late Irving Howe’s “Philip Roth Reconsidered”—in which Howe, citing Roth’s “thin personal culture,” contends that Roth “grossly manipulate[s]” his characters—undoubtedly represents the most scathing scholarly attack on Roth’s work (73, 70). Howe and others considered the writer’s work, laden with goldbricking Jewish soldiers, adulterous Jewish husbands, inordinately materialistic Jewish daughters, and lascivious Jewish sons, in short, “bad for the Jews,” and they refused to let it go unchallenged (Roth refuted the comments of some of these others in a 1963 essay, “Writing about Jews,” but, in 1993, curiously empathized with their concerns in a *New York Times Book Review* article entitled, “A Bit of Jewish Mischief”). To be sure, then, Roth’s Jewish mischief, as he calls it, has ruffled more than a few feathers in the Jewish-American community; one Roth scholar tellingly dedicates his study of

the writer's fiction, "For my mother, who hoped I would write about somebody else" (Pinsker, *The Comedy that "Hoits"*).

I belabor Philip Roth's lukewarm reception by the American Jewish community since I believe that two of Roth's recent novels, *The Counterlife* (1987) and *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (1993), both set largely in Israel, problematize the essential arguments of Roth's detractors. For, as I mention briefly in the introduction to this study, scholars of Jewish-American fiction have noted the curious and disconcerting reluctance of most Jewish-American writers to engage Israel seriously in their work. In an essay praising Roth's focus upon Israel, Robert Alter comments, "It was not that serious American Jewish writers should have been obliged to be Zionists or to produce highbrow versions of *Exodus* but only that the creation of Israel represented a fundamental alteration in the facts of Jewish existence, so that a fiction that simply ignored the momentous challenge of renewed Jewish autonomy could scarcely be thought to probe the problematic of modern Jewish identity" ("Defenders" 55). Theodore Solotaroff also notes in the introduction to his recent anthology of American Jewish fiction that, "American-Jewish fiction, with the exception of Philip Roth's *The Counterlife* [*Operation Shylock* had not yet been published], has been slow, and perhaps loath, to explore the more vexed subject that has been set by the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza . . ." ("The Open Community" xvi). It strikes me as ironic, indeed, that Philip Roth—a Jewish-American writer persistently maligned by the Jewish-American community—has emerged as the most courageous voice to probe this gap in Jewish-American fiction. That Roth, in *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock*, has engaged Israel with far greater intellectual rigor than any other contemporary Jewish-American writer (with the possible exception of Tova Reich) must be a source of great confusion for those critics who have long chastised Roth for his flippant, irresponsible treatment of his Jewish subjects.

Why, though, have other Jewish-American writers been "slow, and perhaps loath" to focus their imaginations squarely upon Israel and the concomitant political issues of the Middle East? I have explored some possible explanations in the introduction—primarily the elusive "strangeness" of Israel to Jewish-American writers. But as Alter implies, Leon Uris's *Exodus*, replete with virulent stereotypes of the Arab and equally wrongheaded stereotypes (though perhaps less pernicious) of the Israeli Jew, went a long way, as well, toward discouraging Jewish-American writers from engaging Israel seriously in their work. Uris,

writing amid the excitement of the “Zionist phase” in America, proved that it was all too easy for the *galut* [exiled] Zionist to fall back on the comfortable stereotypes of the Arab, and of the Israeli Jew, when seeking to write about or merely discuss Israel. This rhetoric, which insidiously stacks the moral cards in the Israeli hand, pervades the casual conversations of Zionists, often in the form of jokes. I offer one as an example: “You know what a moderate Arab is, don’t you? One that runs out of bullets.” Jewish-American novelists, also, have found it difficult to avoid this rhetorical mug’s game when writing about Israel. Leon Uris’s *Exodus* seems politically correct compared to more recent pulp-fiction style vilifications of the Arab in such novels as Peter Abraham’s *Tongues of Fire* (1982), Lewis Orde’s *Munich 10* (1982), Chaim Zeldis’s *Forbidden Love* (1983), and Alfred Coppel’s *Thirty-four East* (1974).

Edward Said proves helpful in explaining why the few Jewish-American writers who depict Arabs in their fiction persist in demonizing them: “I do not believe that authors are mechanically determined by ideology, class, or economic history, but authors are, I also believe, very much in the history of their societies, shaping and shaped by that history and their social experience in different measure” (*Culture* xxii). Now, Said, as a post-colonial critic, does not forge a new critical paradigm here, but simply reaffirms a precept that Ralph Waldo Emerson so eloquently articulated in a much earlier essay, “Art”:

No man can quite emancipate himself from his age and country, or produce a model in which the education, the religion, the politics, usages and arts of his times shall have no share. Though he were never so original, never so wilful and fantastic, he cannot wipe out of his work every trace of the thoughts amidst which it grew. The very avoidance betrays the usage he avoids. Above his will and out of his sight he is necessitated by the air he breathes and the idea on which he and his contemporaries live and toil, to share the manner of his times, without knowing what that manner is. (290)

Put another way, a tension permeates even the best art, for artists simultaneously function as social critics and social products, as arbiters and inheritors of culture. This tension, I believe, emerges in both of Roth’s Middle East novels to suggest the enormity of the Jewish-American *tsores* [troubles] today in our “post-Zionist” milieu when it comes to Israel and the Middle East problem. Both *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock* mark a new and welcome current in Jewish-American fiction

about Israel in that Roth creates thoughtful Jewish and Arab voices openly skeptical of Israeli policy on the West Bank; Roth, the preeminent craftsman of Jewish mischief, refuses to look toward Israel with a myopic eye, bedazzled by Masada, the Western Wall, and all other things Jewish. Still, there remain several narrative subtleties (subtleties that emerge most prevalently in *The Counterlife*) which deconstruct these voices and reinscribe stereotypes of the Arab. As Paul Brown notes (in discussing the colonialist function of stereotypes, in general), these stereotypes contribute to a “discursive strategy . . . to locate or ‘fix’ [the] colonial other in a position of inferiority” (58). Roth, then, as social critic, gives voice to a multitude of Middle East perspectives and takes both Palestinian and Zionist perspectives to task. However, he occasionally reaffirms comfortable Zionist assumptions about the Arabs in the Middle East.

As a scholar of Jewish-American literature and a Zionist, it occurs to me that several readers might wonder why I embrace the methodologies of post-colonial critics to examine Roth’s Jewish-American novels about Israel and the Occupied Territories. So let me say up front that I see no anomaly in scrutinizing a Jewish author’s stereotyped construction of an Arab character or distorted depiction of the Middle East landscape, in general. For I resolutely believe that Israel’s legitimacy as a nation does not depend upon the demonization of a whole race (indeed, I would not be a Zionist if I did believe that such distortions were necessary to preserve Israel’s political viability). Roth deserves much credit for rescuing Jewish-American fiction about Israel from the realm of the conventional Zionist propaganda novel, à la Leon Uris’s *Exodus*. To ignore the textual moments during which Roth unwittingly acquiesces to these conventions would be to participate in the very discourse that Roth endeavors to reject. Alternatively, through exploring the ways in which Roth both resists and reaffirms this discourse, we catch a glimpse of one Jewish-American writer’s struggle to carve out a morally viable narrative perspective on the Middle East. As I have suggested, it is in this struggle itself that Roth betrays the Jewish-American ambivalence about the Middle East in general, and the plight of the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, specifically.

One cannot begin to discuss *The Counterlife* without accounting for its enigmatic structure. The novel consists of five long chapters: “Basel,” “Judea,” “Aloft,” “Gloucestershire,” and “Christendom.” From these five chapters emerge four incongruous fictions about two protagonists,

Nathan Zuckerman, the familiar, alienated fiction writer in Roth's oeuvre, and his brother, Henry, a dentist. In "Basel," narrated in the third person, Roth details Henry's decision whether to continue taking "beta-blockers" for his heart condition or undergo a risky cardiac operation instead. The rub: while the drugs effectively stabilize Henry's condition, they also render him impotent. Unwilling to forego any longer his routine of receiving daily *fellatio* from his young, gentile dental assistant, he opts for surgery and dies on the operating table.

In the next chapter, "Judea," Roth resurrects Henry and places him on the West Bank of Israel. After pulling through the cardiac operation just fine, Henry seems to forget why he undertook the risk in the first place. He rejects the stability of his family and the lascivious delights of his mistress in favor of a folding cot and a gun at Agor, the most militant Israeli settlement in the West Bank. In touch at last with his Jewish roots, Henry changes his name to Hanoch and becomes a loyal follower of Agor's powerful and charismatic leader, Mordecai Lippman. Nathan, who narrates "Judea" and "Aloft," visits his brother upon the request of Henry's/Hanoch's perplexed wife, Carol, but cannot shake Henry's inexorable faith in Lippman.

While the plot in "Aloft" (which details Nathan's eventful flight out of Israel) remains factually consistent with "Judea," Roth once again turns his own fiction on its head in the last two chapters. In "Gloucestershire," the heart problem belongs to Nathan and he does not stand up (so to speak) to the beta-blockers any better than Henry did in the first chapter. It is Nathan who opts for surgery and sexual fulfillment with a gentile woman; it is Nathan who dies on the operating table. However, he does not perish without leaving behind a manuscript—our final chapter, "Christendom"—in which he envisions his survival and arguably fruitful family life with his fourth Christian bride, Maria.

To be sure, Roth, as mischief-maker, quite consciously toys with his artistic medium and challenges our precepts concerning just what "the novel" should really be. Debra Shostak aptly notes that "Roth consistently thumbs his nose at his contract with the reader, thereby asserting his own authority as the author of his text" (211). This presumed contract greatly complicates the act of reading *The Counterlife*. Because the chapters contradict one another in such essential ways, it becomes all too easy to attempt absurdly to locate the "real" fiction. Maria admonishes such tendencies to equate art with life (or, worse yet, art with the artist) as she asserts her own purely fictional role. Fed up with the way

things are going by page 357, she simply throws in the towel: “Dear Nathan, I’m leaving, I’ve left. I’m leaving you and I’m leaving the book . . . I know characters rebelling against their author has been done before, but . . . I have no desire to be original and never did” (*TC* 357). Roth’s elusive postmodern touch has, indeed, frustrated certain critics who take their fiction seriously. Sanford Pinsker, for one, concluded that “whatever my feelings about Israel and the Middle East, they struck me as requiring more than a wisecracker like Philip Roth could provide” (“William Faulkner” 400). In a separate article, “The Lives and Deaths of Nathan Zuckerman,” Pinsker vents some good-humored frustration in noting that Roth’s revival of Henry passes for “experimentalism” although the producers of the television show “Dallas” brought back Bobby Ewing using the same “trick” (54).

Pinsker’s canny dig rings true enough on its consciously superficial level. However, given the great many ambivalences of Jewish-Americans when it comes to Israel and their role as Jews in the Diaspora, Roth’s constant shifting of perspective serves a serious function. At one point in the novel, Nathan offers us a glimpse into this function of Roth’s narrative framework. Says Nathan, “the treacherous imagination is everybody’s maker—we are all the invention of each other, everybody a conjuration conjuring up everyone else. We are all each other’s authors” (*TC* 164). In this light, the novel seems a lot less like “trendy” hocus-pocus, and a lot more like a serious attempt to do justice to the manifold voices and perspectives informing Jewish life—voices that meet and often clash, especially when questions of Israeli policy crop up. In approbation of Roth’s narrative structure, Robert Alter comments that “the dimensions of the question [of how a Jew should live] can be seen only by following out a collision course of opposing ideas” (55). Mark Shechner also recognizes the appropriateness of Roth’s maze-like structure by noting that the Jewish experience is a maze, as well (229).

What voices, then, does Roth construct to define the Arab and the Arab-Israeli conflict, in general, in the “Judea” section of the novel? How does the narrative framework serve to deny and affirm the comfortable stereotypes of the other? And, finally, how does ambivalence function in the novel to call certain colonialist perspectives into question while legitimizing others? Let us now try to answer these difficult questions.

Roth’s choice of Nathan as the chapter’s narrator represents the most salient feature of the narrative resistant to comfortable Zionist pieties about the Middle East conflict. As I have already suggested, in

earlier Jewish-American fiction about Israel, the narrative perspective is almost always unequivocally and passionately Zionist (Uris's *Exodus* and Meyer Levin's *Yehuda* come to mind). In stark contrast, Nathan Zuckerman offers us the perspective of a disaffected Jew at odds with the Zionist privileging of Israel over America. Indeed, Nathan's first trip to Israel in 1960 inspires him to assert his full fledged "Americanness" to the father of his Israeli friend, Shuki Elchanan:

My landscape wasn't the Negev wilderness, or the Galilean hills, or the coastal plan of ancient Philistia; it was industrial, immigrant America—Newark where I'd been raised, Chicago where I'd been educated, and New York where I was living in a basement apartment on a Lower East Side street among poor Ukrainians and Puerto Ricans. My sacred text wasn't the Bible but novels translated from Russian, German, and French into the language in which I was beginning to write and publish my own fiction—not the semantic range of classical Hebrew but the jumpy beat of American English was what excited me. (*TC* 58)

Here, Roth engages one of the sore points that contribute to the current tensions between Israeli and American Jews. Several Israeli Jews noisily insist that the only real home for the Jew is in Israel, while most American Jews (of course) feel otherwise. Nathan, for one, redefines Zionism to include the vision of his Galician grandfathers who fled from Christian Europe to America. Says Nathan, "Insomuch as Zionism meant taking upon oneself, rather than leaving to others, responsibility for one's survival as a Jew, this was their brand of Zionism. And it worked" (*TC* 59). Nathan's grandfathers, then, had a Zionist idea of their own when they embraced America as homeland for the Jew, not Israel. Nathan pontificates eloquently about his homeland's pluralism and tolerance and, moreover, attacks Israel's "law of return" by boasting that America "did not have at its center the idea of exclusion" (*TC* 60).

Israel's law of return—which encourages all Jews to emigrate and restricts the immigration of other people—remains the most controversial element of Zionism. In 1975, the United Nations, under secretary-general Kurt Waldheim, equated Zionism with Racism (this resolution was repealed in 1991). Alan Dershowitz cannot seem to spill enough ink in defending the policy (see *Chutzpah* [1991]), while an Israeli journalist, Yossi Melman, takes a more critical look at the law of return (see *The New Israelis* [1992]). The latest skirmishes can be heard

within the Zionist ranks. For example, after Israel recently announced its decision to bar immigrants with the HIV virus, Israelis such as Dan Yakir, an Israeli civil rights attorney, and Ephraim Gur, a member of the Israeli parliament, argued that the new policy violated the law of return. Several Israelis also object to the rapid influx of non-Jews from Europe and the Far East (a state-supported influx of workers who are more than happy to take on the menial labor jobs formerly reserved for Palestinian workers). Finally, in the wake of Baruch Goldstein's massacre of twenty-nine Palestinians in a Hebron mosque, Israeli journalists like Allan Shapiro are questioning whether Jews who incite racism should be denied the right to immigrate to Israel (Shapiro 6). On less contentious fronts, Joel Fleischmann of television's quirky/cerebral *Northern Exposure* recently rejoiced, "You [meaning Jews in exile for 2000 years] can always go to Israel." Nathan, then, asserts his distance from an essential and heated Zionist ideal (to make Israel a truly *Jewish* homeland) when he attacks the law of return.

Nathan's ambivalences concerning Israel remain strong some twenty years later as he returns to see his brother, Henry (or should we call him Hanoah now?). Upon visiting the Western Wall—the last remnant of the Second Temple and the most hallowed of Jewish places—Nathan feels as unspiritual as ever. While he observes a group of devout Jews praying (or *davening*) fervently, he thinks, "If there is a God who plays a role in our world, I will eat every hat in this town" (*TC* 96). He feels alienated from the Jews at the Wall and believes that he "would have felt less detachment from seventeen Jews who openly admitted that they *were* talking to rock than from these seventeen who imagined themselves telexing the Creator directly" (*TC* 96).

Nathan asserts his detachment from the Jews at the Wall more overtly when he refuses to join a minyan when asked by a young Chasid. To understand the significance of this act, one must understand that a Jewish congregation cannot even perform the Torah service without a minyan, a group of at least ten post-Bar Mitzvah Jews; and that this service celebrates (among other things) God's covenant with the children of Israel. Thus, Nathan's refusal to join the minyan can be viewed as a repudiation of Israel itself. That said, let me assert my hesitancy to place such symbolic weight into Nathan's act (my conditional tone was quite intentional). Indeed, I can no more imagine Nathan participating in a group card game, a group chat, or a group *anything*, than I can imagine him participating in group prayer. However, this episode does make it quite clear

that Nathan visits Israel not to make *aliyah* in his idyllic homeland but, rather, to bail his brother out of such a ridiculous act of self-deception.

Given Nathan's alienation from Israel, we should not be surprised that he stands foursquare against those blind followers of the Jewish state who see the Arab only as a war-loving antagonist of the Jew. Nathan describes his Uncle Shimmy—who says “bomb the Arab bastards till they cry uncle”—as “Neanderthal” and “arguably the family's stupidest relative” (TC 41–42). Nonetheless, there is something unequivocally dissatisfying about Nathan's virtual apathy toward the Middle East. Thus, Roth creates a more serious countervoice to Shimmy's crude Zionist perspective in Nathan's friend, Shuki Elchanan. An Israeli journalist, Shuki asserts a more moderate Zionist position and would rather see Mordecai Lippman and his cohorts leave the West Bank to the Arabs. He even expresses remorse upon discovering that Nathan's brother has joined Lippman's settlement on the West Bank. Herein, we receive our first real glimpse of Lippman through Shuki's eyes:

Well, that's wonderful. Lippman drives into Hebron with his pistol and tells the Arabs in the market how the Jews and Arabs can live happily side by side as long as the Jews are on top. He's dying for somebody to throw a Molotov cocktail. Then his thugs can really go to town. (TC 83)

Here, Roth turns the “Neanderthal” discourse of Shimmy on its head. The Jew, represented by Lippman, emerges as the aggressor of the Middle East; the Jew wields a pistol and anxiously hopes for violence; and the Jew invades the peaceful Arab realm of a Hebron market. Shuki reflects that Jews of Lippman's ilk are at least equally infatuated with the gun (representing heroic Hebrew force) as they are with the Jewish beard which has long stood for saintly Yiddish weakness. He asks Nathan, “Is your brother as thrilled by the religion as by the explosives?” (TC 84).

In Shuki, Roth creates a thoughtful Israeli voice which contrasts sharply to Nathan's mere estrangement from Israel. Shuki does not only oppose the aggressive methods of Lippman's colonialism, but takes Lippman to task on ideological grounds, as well. He sees the principle behind Lippman's desire to reclaim the West Bank as Judea—Israel's historical claim on the land rooted in the Torah—as self-serving and corrupt. Such an argument, according to Shuki, which places all of its stock in the Old

Testament, smacks of smug, religious piety completely out of touch with the exigencies of the contemporary political landscape:

Everything going wrong with this country is in the first five books of the Old Testament. Smite the enemy, sacrifice your son, the desert is yours and nobody else's all the way to the Euphrates. A body count of dead Philistines on every other page—that's the wisdom of their wonderful Torah. (*TC* 84)

To be sure, Jewish fundamentalists find no friend in Shuki Elchanan. He continues, "if they want so much to sleep at the biblical source because that is where Abraham tied his shoelaces, then they can sleep there under Arab rule!" (*TC* 84). Shuki does embrace the Zionist idea, but not as defined by the "gangster," Lippman. He recognizes the hypocrisy inherent in any attempt by Israel, a state conceived as a refuge from European fascism, to police a steadily rising indigenous population, the Arabs.

It is significant that Shuki describes Lippman and his fanatical movement, modelled after the messianic Zionists of the Gush Emunim Jewish Settler movement, before Roth allows Lippman to speak for himself. Indeed, before we even hear him speak, we are convinced that he must be more than a little bit nuts. Shuki's portrait of Agor's leader, in fact, provokes Nathan to hurry to his brother's aid, thinking that if "Lippman was anything like the *shlayger* [whipper] he'd described, then it was possible that Henry was as much captive as disciple" (*TC* 89). Although false, Nathan's suspicions are not at all unreasonable. Lippman's very appearance goes a long way toward convincing one that he, if anyone, would be the type to exert his physical will over others.

Upon first seeing Agor's leader, Nathan reflects that his "wide-set, almond-shaped, slightly protuberant eyes, though a gentle milky blue, proclaimed, unmistakably, STOP" (*TC* 128). Nathan sees in Lippman's mangled body, from his crippled leg (an injury from the 1967 Six-Day war) to his smashed nose, evidence of those who have tried—and failed—to stop *him*. One need not wonder what the recently impotent Henry/Hanoch sees in Agor's militant defender of the faith; Lippman embodies power and potency, as Nathan will later reflect (*TC* 154). Roth, however, does not want his readers to be so easily taken in by Lippman and his fundamentalist precepts. Thus, he undercuts Nathan's initially heroic description of the leader by emphasizing his preposter-

ous head of hair, which Nathan describes as a “bunchy cabbage of disarranged plumage” (TC 128–129). Lippman comes off, finally, not as an indomitable warrior, but as “some majestic Harpo Marx—Harpo as Hannibal” (TC 129). Not only are we predisposed to view Lippman as politically crazy (via Shuki), but now slightly ridiculous, as well.

Still, we cannot discount the power of Lippman's rhetoric. Through the exclamation points and italics riddled throughout the fifteen or so pages dominated by Lippman's voice, Roth offers a short course in the stylistic distinction between the *Jewish-American* novel, in general, and those of the Jamesian variety. At any rate, through Lippman's narrow lens of Jewish fundamentalism, the Arab emerges only as an immutable and inexorable counterforce to an ideologically pure Israel. Lippman would, no doubt, frown upon the September 17, 1993, accord between Israel and the PLO since, according to him, “the Arab will take what is given and then continue the war, and instead of less trouble there will be *more*” (TC 130). Though Lippman recognizes the conflicting political voices from the Israeli side of the fence, he can envision only a monolithic Islam bent on spilling Jewish blood:

Islam is not a civilization of doubt like the civilization of the Hellenized Jew. The Jew is always blaming himself for what happens in Cairo. He is blaming himself for what happens in Baghdad. But in Baghdad, believe me, they do not blame themselves for what is happening in Jerusalem. Theirs is not a civilization of doubt—theirs is a civilization of *certainty*. Islam is not plagued by niceys and goodies who want to be sure they don't do the wrong thing. Islam wants one thing only: to *win*, to *triumph*, to obliterate the cancer of Israel from the body of the Islamic world. (TC 131)

Lippman refers specifically to Shuki Elchanan when he castigates the “goody” Jew concerned with issues of morality. These moral issues, according to Lippman, are irrelevant in the Middle East because the Arabs are ill-equipped to honor any such virtue. Their monomaniac quest to reclaim Israeli land renders moral considerations obsolete. Consequently, Lippman can only make sense of Shuki by viewing him as a coward, kowtowing to the demands of the goy: “How he wants the goy to throw him just a little smile! How desperately he wants that smile” (TC 136).

Put simply, power, and who wields more of it, represents the only relevant issue of the conflict as far as Lippman is concerned. The Arabs,

he would have us believe, forced Israel into a game in which only one can win—"those are the rules the Arabs have set" (*TC* 137). Henry/Hanoch, a virtual mouthpiece of the Lippman ideology, asserts that "[Arabs] don't respect niceness and they don't respect weakness. What the Arab respects is power" (*TC* 119). Lippman, of course, does not shy away from exerting such power, whether voicing his resolve to Arab leaders in their own tongue or standing up to the disapproving Israeli government itself.

While Lippman's essential argument may ring true for some readers given the history of Arab aggression against the Jewish state, Roth undercuts the attractiveness of Lippman's politics here by dramatizing his alienation from the Israeli government (the government responsible, I should add, for seizing the Golan Heights and the West Bank in the first place). Lippman fears that Israel will attempt to placate the Arabs by dismantling the Jewish settlements on the West Bank and raves, "let their Jewish army come and stone us! I dare this Jewish government! I dare *any* Jewish government, to try to evict us by force!" (*TC* 136). Referring to the Jewish army as "their" army (Israel's, not his), Lippman distances himself from Israel. Some lines later, in an apparent attempt to convince us once and for all of his fanaticism and paranoia, he warns Nathan of the forthcoming American Holocaust of the Jews which will be carried out by, of all people, the blacks. According to Lippman, the blacks in the ghettos "are already sharpening their knives" (*TC* 139). Nathan pokes fun at Lippman's paranoia by asking him whether the blacks will accomplish the slaughter "With or without the help of the federal government" (*TC* 139).

Ultimately, the reader can only espouse Lippman's unwavering Middle East policy—"we do not give ground!"—by rejecting the perspective of the narrator, Nathan, who hardly seems moved by his antagonist's vehemence (*TC* 145). Just after Lippman's tirade, Nathan cannot keep himself from insulting his brother's ridiculous allegiance to the Harpo/Hannibal. Abandoning tact altogether, Nathan asks of his brother, "when are you going to stop being an apprentice fanatic and start practicing dentistry again?" (*TC* 155). He also wishes that he had told Lippman when he had the chance that "Maybe the Jews begin with Judea, but Henry doesn't and he never will. He begins with WJZ and WOR, with double features at the Roosevelt on Saturday afternoons and Sunday doubleheaders at Ruppert Stadium watching the Newark Bears. Not nearly as epical, but there you are. Why don't you let my

brother go?" (TC 150). In thus playing Moses to Lippman's Pharaoh, Nathan calls attention to Lippman's enslavement of those around him, not only the enslavement of Henry/Hanoch but also of the Arabs whom he controls with his gun.

We should not underestimate Roth's achievement in bringing so many palpable Jewish voices to bear on the Middle East problem. There are those who doubt that such disparate Jewish voices even exist. In Edward Said's influential study, *Orientalism*, he interestingly succumbs to one of the "Occidental" tendencies he admonishes (to fix the "other" as morally inferior) when he defines Israelis as merely the bourgeois colonialists of the Middle East. Said argues that "the Semitic myth bifurcated in the Zionist movement; one Semite went the way of Orientalism, the other, the Arab, was forced to go the way of the Oriental" (*Orientalism* 307). Such a simple dichotomy does little justice to the complicated political issues that beset the Middle East evident in the heated debates within the Israeli camp. Only recently has Said acknowledged "the contribution of many Jewish, and even Zionist, groups and individuals . . . speaking out for human rights, and active[ly] campaigning against Israeli militarism"; and this acknowledgment rings more like politically correct lip service than real conviction amid an essay that overwhelmingly reaffirms his earlier views ("Reflections" 10). Even after Israel's courageous provision for Palestinian self-rule in Gaza and Jericho, Said curiously commented in the *New York Times* that "We want a real agreement with Israel. . . . They don't want any agreement at all" (Qtd. in Schemo A10). Moreover, Said refused to see Baruch Goldstein as the psychotic radical that he was, and instead asserted that he merely typified the "extraordinary violence latent in American Zionism" ("Hebron" 27). If nothing else, then, the contradictory Jewish voices in the "Judea" section of *The Counterlife* surely problematize Said's essential vision of a monolithic Israel.

It would be easy to end my discussion of *The Counterlife* here, on this unqualified note of Roth's resistance to Lippman's colonialist perspective. However, to do so would be to ignore the counter-elements of the text through which Roth reaffirms—wittingly or unwittingly—Lippman's arguments. As I have already implied, several elements of the narrative reinscribe the conventional views of the Arab and, thereby, implicitly affirm an Israeli moral rectitude. Roth's use of pathos represents the most subtle of these narrative modes. Try as he might to hold the "Neanderthal" view of the Arab up to scrutiny, Roth cannot help but

espouse this view of a war-loving, sadistic antagonist of the Jews, as well, via this rhetorical technique.

There are a precious few moments that shape Nathan's impressions of Israel. Interestingly enough, most of these moments are emotionally charged with the element of Israeli suffering and sacrifice caused directly by Arab aggression. In a taxi, on the way to visit his brother at Agor, Nathan observes a group of Israeli soldiers sunning and listening to music on the side of the road. He unflinchingly comments to the driver, "Easy going army you have here" (*TC* 106). In response, the driver shows Nathan a picture of his son in army fatigues, whom Nathan describes as "an intense-looking boy" (*TC* 106). When Nathan says innocuously enough, "Very nice," the driver tersely replies, "Dead . . . Someone is shooting a bomb. He is no more there. No shoes, nothing . . . Killed . . . No good. I never see my son no more" (*TC* 106). The driver's laconic delivery only intensifies the scene's pathos, and Nathan, of course, stands admonished for his blithe judgment of the army's lack of seriousness. Moreover, the Arab—undoubtedly the "someone" responsible for the bomb—does not emerge from the scene unscathed either. Indeed, the reader must see the Arab as responsible for the driver's grief by randomly killing his mere "boy" of a son.

Roth represents the Arab not only as a senseless murderer of children, but as downright sadistic. The barbarity of the Arab emerges most vividly as Nathan recalls Shuki's description of his brother's torture at the hands of the Syrians during the Six-Day War:

After the Syrian retreat, they found him and the rest of his captured platoon with their hands tied behind them to stakes in the ground; they had been castrated, decapitated, and their penises stuffed in their mouths. Strewn around the abandoned battlefield were necklaces made of their ears. (*TC* 70)

The passage hardly needs elaboration. In short, it unequivocally strips the Arab of any moral high ground. What moral claim (on land, on human rights issues, on *anything*) can such sadistic people make? One need only read the passage to understand why Shuki's son, Mati, feels a duty to give up his beloved piano for military service.

Such moments of pathos leave the strongest impression on Nathan, and Roth takes care to emphasize these scenes, just in case we have not remembered them as well as his narrator. Nathan reminds us of his

"impressions fostered by what little I'd heard from [Shuki] about his massacred brother, his disheartened wife, and that patriotic young pianist of his serving in the army . . . nor could I forget the Yemenite father who'd driven me to Agor, who, without any common language to express to me the depths of his grief, nonetheless, with Sacco-Vanzettian eloquence, had cryptically described the extinction of his soldier-son" (*TC* 112). Through Nathan's reflections, Roth underscores these scenes in which the Arab emerges as the violent and sadistic aggressor of the Middle East.

Moreover, Roth gives the Arab no voice in the text to counter the pro-Zionist pathos. In fact, the only Arabs who are ever specifically represented in the novel are the harmless restaurant owners in Hebron where the Zuckerman brothers eat. Nathan comments that "The Arab family who ran the place couldn't have been more welcoming; indeed, the owner, who took our order in English, called Henry 'Doctor' with considerable esteem" (*TC* 120). The restaurant owner's respectful salutation to Henry/Hanoch, "Doctor," (filtered indirectly through Nathan's perspective) represents the only word uttered by an Arab in the novel. Essentially, then, Roth defines through *The Counterlife* two kinds—and only two kinds—of Arabs that exist in the Middle East: the "bad" Arabs who murder Jewish children and men (though they torture the men first) and the "good" Arabs who speak a polite, subservient English to the American Jew.

Roth does flirt with the possibilities of depicting a significant Arab voice in Shuki's farewell letter to Nathan. Through his letter, Shuki joins the ranks of Roth characters who attempt to control Nathan's pen (one thinks especially of Judge Wapter's ten points in *The Ghost Writer* [1979]). Shuki begs of Nathan not to satirize Mordecai Lippman for fear that the fictionalized Lippman will make for bad Israeli P.R. in America. Herein, he suggests what an Arab voice might sound like:

By the way, you haven't met Lippman's Arab counterpart yet and been assaulted head-on by the wildness of *his* rhetoric. I'm sure that at Agor you will have heard Lippman talking about the Arabs and how we must rule them, but if you haven't heard the Arabs talk about ruling, if you haven't *seen* them ruling, then as a satirist you're in for an even bigger treat. Jewish ranting and bullshitting there is—but, however entertaining you may find Lippman's, the Arab ranting and bullshitting has distinction all its own, and the characters spewing it are no less ugly. (*TC* 183)

The closest we come to a significant Arab voice in the novel, then, is Shuki's allusion here to an altogether "ugly" one. Shuki calls this nebulous Arab "as bad if not worse" than Lippman and implores Nathan not to "mislead the guy in Kansas. It's too damn complicated for that" (*TC* 183). Interestingly enough, Roth's mere suggestion of a possible Arab voice evidently suits critics of the novel just fine. Most scholars have, up to this point, focused their efforts squarely upon the aesthetic implications of Roth's structure (see Shostak and Goodheart). Naomi Sokoloff comes closest to placing a finger on the absence of an Arab voice when she notes the absence of a moderate American-Jewish voice to counter Nathan's detachment from Israel (79). Sokoloff's recognition, however, of certain absent voices in the novel makes her omission of the absent Arab all the more conspicuous. What is more, the critics' refusal to acknowledge the absent "other" in *The Counterlife* raises interesting questions concerning their unconscious complicity in the anti-Arab strategies that Roth employs (also unconsciously, I believe) through his narrative.

That said, let me note that I do not presume to prescribe a short list of mandatory voices the Jewish-American writer must create when thoughts of Israel bestir the imagination (e.g., one Arab voice/one American voice/one Israeli voice). However, the conspicuous absence of the Arab in Jewish-American novels about Israel does have an effect, well worth our attention. In *The Counterlife*, the absence of Arab voices contributes to the anti-Arab elements of the text which not only solidify comfortable stereotypes of the Arab, but also valorize several Jewish perspectives in the novel that would otherwise remain suspect. Henry's/Hanoch's religious awakening, for example, takes on a certain indisputable poignancy. While we may laugh at his ridiculous week-long worship of a challah as if it were sculpture, his convincing identification with the most orthodox sect of Israeli Jews—"I am not *just* a Jew, I'm not *also* a Jew—I'm a Jew as deep as those Jews"—emerges as heroic when pitted against the evil Arab empire (*TC* 68). Given Roth's depiction of the Arab, who can dispute the exigency of such Jewish awakenings? To survive, the Jew, it seems, must develop a "frame of reference slightly larger than the kitchen table in Newark?" (*TC* 155).

Mordecai Lippman offers this broader perspective. For while Roth undercuts Lippman's arguments (as I have explored above), we should not give short shrift to the actual persuasiveness of his rhetoric rooted in his unchallenged depiction of the Arab; they throw stones at school

buses and roll hand grenades at his house while his children sleep (*TC* 132, 143). In the absence of an Arab counter-voice, Lippman's militancy seems an attractive alternative to the traditional Jewish role of victim. Even Nathan defends the viability of Lippman's politics in contrast to Shuki's moderation when he replies to his friend's letter: "It's Lippman, after all, who is the unequivocal patriot and devout believer, whose morality is plain and unambiguous, whose rhetoric is righteous and readily accessible" (*TC* 185). Indeed, while one may wish to dispute (and rightly so) Roth's affinity for the Mordecai Lippmans of Israel, one cannot deny that he also equips him with the most forceful arguments. Nathan must admit after his dinner with Lippman that Agor's leader rhetorically "outclassed" him.

I hope that I have illustrated the nagging attractiveness and repulsiveness of Mordecai Lippman's fundamentalist stance and Shuki Elchanan's more moderate Zionism—a tension I attribute to Roth's ambivalences concerning the Middle East problem. Ultimately, he can neither exalt nor condemn *any* Jewish perspective. Rather than a shortcoming of the novel, this element manifests itself as Roth's greatest stride toward a thoughtful Jewish-American imagining of the current Israeli landscape. That much said, however, the absence of an intelligent Arab voice strikes one, today, as particularly odd given the volubility of such voices amid the current political climate in the Middle East. Hanan Ashrawi and Faisal Hussein, for example, have made their way from the inconspicuous pages of the *Journal of Palestine Studies* to the nightly news. Perhaps recognizing the several muted voices in *The Counterlife*, Roth creates a significant Palestinian character (and several more Jewish ones as well) in his latest Middle East novel, *Operation Shylock: A Confession*.

There can be little doubt that *Operation Shylock* can be seen, at least in part, as Roth's attempt to probe further into the polemical Middle East perspectives he only touches upon in *The Counterlife*. To wit: Shuki Elchanan, at one point in *The Counterlife*, suggests that the Jewish Diaspora has fulfilled the function that the first Zionists had envisioned only a Jewish state could fulfill: "we are the excitable, ghettoized, jittery little Jews of the Diaspora, and you are the Jews with all the confidence and cultivation that comes of feeling at home where you are" (*TC* 82). In *Operation Shylock*, Roth pursues Shuki's "Diasporism" further. Philip Roth, the protagonist, travels to Israel simply to interview his friend, Aharon Appelfeld; while in Israel, though, he comes face to face with his

double, who usurps Roth's identity to more successfully tout the anti-Zionist ideology of Diasporism. While this ideology can be seen as an elaboration of some of Shuki's Diasporist inclinations, it can also be seen as an elaboration of Jimmy Lustig's plan to destroy Yad Vashem in *The Counterlife*. Jimmy wants to destroy Israel's Holocaust remembrance Hall to preclude Jewish moral abrasiveness toward gentiles and, ultimately, to avert a second Holocaust; likewise, Roth's double has these same goals in mind, but sets his sights on dismantling Israel itself, to a great extent, to achieve them. Zionism, according to Roth's impostor, "has outlived its historical function" (OS 32). Resettlement in the European Diaspora—the "most authentic Jewish homeland, the birthplace of rabbinic Judaism, Jewish secularism, socialism . . ."—would avert a second Holocaust at the hands of the Arabs as well as accomplish a "spiritual victory over Hitler and Auschwitz" (OS 32).

Though it may be hard to imagine a more harebrained Middle East proposal than Jimmy Lustig's in *The Counterlife*, Roth manages to do just that in the Diasporism of Roth's impostor. Roth pokes fun, on several occasions, at the implausibility of the plan. When Roth suggests to his double that Europe might be less than elated to reabsorb thousands of Jews, the impostor replies,

You know what will happen in Warsaw, at the railway station, when the first trainload of Jews returns? There will be crowds to welcome them. People will be jubilant. People will be in tears. They will be shouting, "Our Jews are back! Our Jews are back!" The spectacle will be transmitted by television throughout the world. (OS 45)

The hilarity of this fantasy aside, one need only visit Auschwitz in Poland and see what short shrift Jewish suffering receives on the guided tour to realize that Poland has yet to come to terms with its Jews. Alternatively, how many Jews have come to terms with Europe? Would Israeli Jews be anxious to resettle in the very European countries from which they recently fled? Says Roth to his double, "are they lining up, the Romanian Jews who are dying to go back to Ceausescu's Romania? Are they lining up, the Polish Jews who are dying to return to Communist Poland? Those Russians struggling to leave the Soviet Union, is your plan to turn them around at the Tel Aviv airport . . . ?" (OS 47). Roth does such a good job exposing the ridiculousness of Diasporism that one scholar responded in a *Tikkun* symposium on Roth's Diasporism,

"Do you really expect me to take 'Diasporism' seriously when Philip Roth doesn't propose it seriously?" (Dickstein 44).

My hunch is that Roth has received few letters from Israeli Jews inquiring further about Diasporism and one-way tickets to their respective European homelands. Roth, one hopes, took the advice of the *New York Times* reviewer who suggested that the author send his double on the promotional tour of the book in Israel. Still, we cannot dismiss Diasporism as blithely as the above scholar, for Roth uses the double's Diasporism to access and scrutinize legitimate Middle East concerns. The serious implications associated with the Diasporist ideology, not its obvious absurdity, make *Operation Shylock* a noteworthy book. For in the novel, Roth raises the stakes considerably from Jimmy Lustig's Yad Vashem plan. In *Diasporism*, Roth's impostor does not merely call into question the political shrewdness of Holocaust remembrance (as Lustig does in *The Counterlife*), but considers whether Jews have exploited the Holocaust to legitimize a colonialist state, Israel, that violently oppresses the indigenous Palestinian population.

Roth dramatizes this view most forcefully through George Ziad (or Zee), a Palestinian friend of Roth's from graduate school who mistakes him for his double in Israel. In *Ziad*, Roth creates a radical Palestinian voice which complements the radical Zionist voice of Mordecai Lippman in *The Counterlife*. Since graduate school, Ziad has immersed himself in the Palestinian cause and, thus, strikes up an immediate kinship once again with Roth, whom he thinks founded the Diasporist movement; few Arabs, of course, wouldn't love Roth's double who yearns to see the state halved of its Jewish population and returned to its 1948 borders. Ziad, like Lippman in *The Counterlife*, delivers a fundamentalist diatribe that spans several pages. By exposing what he perceives to be Israel's "mythology of victimization," Ziad implicitly refutes Lippman's perspective concerning Israel's claim to the Occupied Territories:

This is the public-relations campaign cunningly devised by the terrorist Begin; to establish Israeli military expansionism as historically just by joining it to the memory of Jewish victimization; to rationalize—as historical justice, as just retribution, as nothing more than self-defense—the gobbling up of the Occupied Territories and the driving of the Palestinians off their land once again. What justifies seizing every opportunity to extend Israel's boundaries? Auschwitz. What justifies bombing Beirut civilians? Auschwitz . . . (OS 132).

Now, Roth intentionally blurs the line between fact and fiction in the novel and some initial reviewers of the book exhausted a good deal of page space promoting their spin on the conundrum; to my mind, however, passages like the one above suggest the relative fruitlessness of the “fact or fiction” debate. For the issues Ziad raises here are certainly real enough. True, Roth describes his friend’s views as a “pungent ideological mulch of overstatement and lucidity, of insight and stupidity, of precise historical data and willful historical ignorance . . . the intoxication of resistance had rendered [Ziad] incapable of even nibbling at the truth, however intelligent he still happened to be” (OS 129). But, Ziad’s essential claim that “the state of Israel has drawn the last of its moral credit out of the bank of the dead six million” cuts to the heart of the real life concerns of several Jews on the political left: that Israelis, and Americans, have exploited the Holocaust-related guilt of the world community to justify the state’s actions for too long (OS 135).

Consider, for example, the case of Amos Elon, an Israeli journalist who persistently invokes the Holocaust to describe Israel’s victimization of the Arabs; or Thomas L. Friedman, who laments the “Yad Vasheming” of Israel in *From Beirut to Jerusalem* (282); or consider the members of the Citizens’ Rights Movement and the New Jewish Agenda—Jewish organizations on the far left—who also invoke the language of the Shoah to call attention to the plight of the Palestinians. Hilda Silverman, an Agenda leader, published an essay provocatively entitled, “Palestinian Holocaust Memorial?” In the April 17, 1994, edition of *The New York Times*, the editors of the liberal American-Jewish magazine, *Tikkun*, used a full-page advertisement to encourage the speeding up of the Middle East Peace Process and condemned the “distressing tendency in some sectors of the Jewish world, both in Israel and the United States . . . to act as if past Jewish suffering is the warrant for contemporary acts of insensitivity or even brutality.” Finally, in Paul Breines’s 1990 study, *Tough Jews: Political Fantasies and the Moral Dilemma of American Jewry*, he probes the basis for this “distressing tendency” and, in so doing, characterizes Zionism in a way that would, no doubt, please Ziad:

Zionism is at once a decisive break with the traditions of Jewish weakness and gentleness and also not so decisive a break: it rejects meekness and gentleness in favor of the normalcy of toughness, while preserving the older tradition of the Jews as a special or chosen people,

which *depends on* imagery of Jews as frail victims. Zionism needs its weak and gentle Jewish counterparts to give moral justification to Jewish participation in the world of bodies, specifically, of physical violence, including killing or even sadism. To put the matter most starkly: the image of Jewish victimization vindicates the image of the Jewish victimizer. (50)

An exclamation point here, a vitriolic comment there, and this passage would appear as if it were lifted directly from Ziad's dialogue in *Operation Shylock*. How far, really, is Breines's coolly intellectual analysis of the Israeli ethos from Ziad's pithy perspective, "Marlboro has the Marlboro Man, Israel has its Holocaust Man" (OS 296). At any rate, my point is that several left-wing Jews (in America and in Israel) seem to agree with Ziad that Israel, by exploiting the Holocaust to justify its brutality and colonialism, has "forfeited its claim to the Holocaust" (OS 135). Although Roth, then, might undercut Ziad's credibility, the Palestinian regardless puts his finger on the pulse of our present cultural debate over the Middle East.

What is more, Roth's depiction of the contemporary Middle East scene goes a long way toward salvaging George Ziad's credibility. Roth includes several scenes in the novel, for example, that call into question how humanely Israel treats the Arab Israelis. Indeed, Roth's double espouses Diasporism not only to avert a second Holocaust of the Jews but also to avert the more insidious and gradual moral decay of the Israeli Jews precipitated by their treatment of the Palestinians. One does not leave the novel certain of widespread Israeli abuses of the Arabs. Still, we see enough heavily armed Israeli soldiers in the West Bank and hear of enough blood-stained walls there to make us suspicious of Israeli abuses of power. Roth also depicts part of a trial of Palestinian children (who may or may not have been drugged and abused by the Israeli police) accused less than convincingly of throwing Molotov cocktails. Roth muses that the courtroom, with its Jewish flags, judges, and lawyers was a courtroom "such as Jews had envisioned in their fantasies for many hundreds of years, answering longings even more unimaginable than those for an army or a state. One day we will determine justice" (OS 140). Roth wonders, and so do we, how fair a trial any Palestinian can expect in such a courtroom. To have even a chance, the defendants must rely upon an Orthodox Jewish defense lawyer who harbors little sympathy for Palestinians and admonishes Roth (mistaking him for his double) for his Diasporism.

Most disturbingly, perhaps, Roth dramatizes the ambivalence of an Israeli army lieutenant who must tell his mother each night, “Look, you want to know if I personally beat anyone? I didn’t. But I had to do an awful lot of maneuvering to avoid it!” (OS 169). The soldier realizes that Israel cannot survive by acting out of a moral ideology, but when he looks at the Israeli government he wants to vomit (OS 170). Through all of these elements (certain to enrage many Jews), Roth presents a disturbing contrast, a gap, between what Israel was supposed to be, and what it has become. Roth’s skeptical vision of the Israeli moral ledger prompted one American-Jewish writer, Daphne Merkin, to comment, “If I were living in Israel—if I were my sister, say, who lives in Jerusalem with her American husband and four American-born children despite ongoing doubts and criticism—I would despise this book. As someone whose emotional investment is safely tallied from these shores I merely dislike it” (“Philip Roth’s Diasporism” 44). Indeed, we cannot dismiss Roth’s characterization of Ziad as a blithe, “colonialist” depiction of the Palestinian. For the above elements of the novel, which raise the hackles of Merkin and several other Jews, lend a good bit of credibility to Ziad’s maniacally rendered perspective.

Given what Roth sees in Israel, one should not be surprised that he cannot dismiss his double’s Diasporism as merely “anti-Zionist crap” (OS 289). As Roth’s impostor notes, the two Roths’ identities are not wholly distinguishable; there is not one liar, one truth-teller, one honest Philip, one dishonest Philip, one reasonable Philip and one psychopath (OS 193). Likewise, there is not one “Diasporist” and one “Zionist” Roth. Roth must admit the “mad plausibility about [Diasporism]. There’s more than a grain of truth in recognizing and acknowledging the Eurocentrism of Judaism” (Roth, as I noted earlier, suggested this Eurocentrism in *The Counterlife* through Nathan Zuckerman’s redefinition of Zionism to include the vision of his Galician grandfathers) (OS 191). Roth dramatizes the melting of the two Roths’ identities as Roth usurps the identity of his double and fervently espouses Diasporism to George Ziad and his family. He describes Irving Berlin—who turned Christmas into a holiday about snow and Easter into a fashion show—as the father of the Diasporist movement. Israeli nuclear reactors pale in comparison to Berlin’s “nice” defusing of Christian enmity toward the Jews, as Berlin’s songs did nothing to jeopardize the Jews’ moral survival. Says Roth (the writer-character, not the impostor), “Better to be marginal neurotics, anxious assimilationists, and everything else that

the Zionists despise, better to *lose* the state than to lose your moral being by unleashing a nuclear war" (OS 158). Roth undercuts his lecture by calling it "Diasporist blah-blah," but the moral issues he raises are compelling given the backdrop in the novel of a volatile West Bank where Israeli morality seems under threat constantly. At least one critic, Daniel Lazare, has noted Roth's courage in expressing these controversial sentiments "full blast" and welcomes Roth's celebration, in "Diasporism," of the assimilationist impulse over the nationalist impulse. Says Lazare, "Out of the nationalistic, embattled, ethnically-cleansed existence in Israel has come—what? The invasion of Lebanon, the West Bank and Gaza Strip settlements, and the Intifada" (42).

Granted, Lazare subscribes to the impostor Roth's Diasporism a good deal more than does Roth (the real-life writer, that is). The anti-Zionist plan of Roth's double to retake Europe as if Hitler never reigned for twelve years has its appeal (there is, in fact, a strong Jewish tradition of blotting out the names of enemies), but only a superficial, ideological appeal. The illusory outward health and vigor of Roth's double suggests the concomitant shallowness of Diasporism (though Roth's impostor looks like the "after" to Roth's "before" in a plastic surgery advertisement, he dies of cancer shortly after his trip to Israel). Roth, recognizing the superficiality of Diasporism, protests vehemently for Holocaust remembrance since "Those twelve years cannot be expunged from history any more than they can be obliterated from memory, however mercifully forgetful one might prefer to be. The meaning of the destruction of European Jewry cannot be measured or interpreted by the brevity with which it was attained" (OS 43). The anti-Semitism that culminated in the Holocaust still seethes close to the surface in Roth's Middle East and in Europe, making Diasporism impossible and Zionism essential. Roth feels the palpable anti-Semitic threat in a vile caricature of Menachem Begin standing over a pyramid of dead Arab bodies which he sees in the London papers; in the free and easy way with which Palestinians and their sympathizers (like some of the Jewish ones listed above) link the Israeli Occupation with Nazism; in the way the popular press dignifies stone-throwing "riots" by calling them "uprisings"; in the Iraqi Scud attacks on Israel during the Gulf War; and, most forcefully, Roth recognizes this threat in the assassination of Leon Klinghoffer while aboard the *Achille Lauro*. His murder, as Roth imagines it, convinces one of the Holocaust's enduring relevance and the consequent necessity of Israel. Despite any Diasporist urge for normalcy in a neutral Europe, the

Klinghoffer murder proves that “*there is no neutral territory*,” not even on a cruise ship (328). Roth espouses Israel indirectly, yet convincingly, through the above details, which resonate in *Operation Shylock*. Roth may be critical of the Israeli government and military, but he falls far short of seriously endorsing “Diasporism”; he may be tempted to forget the Holocaust, but realizes the ineluctable moral and political urgency to remember (Roth, in fact, has reflected in interviews upon the enduring relevance of the Holocaust) (see Roth, “Interview” 136).

Let me hasten to add, however, that Lazare’s espousal of the essential Diasporist/Palestinian arguments, *as Roth presents them*, illustrates the moral rigorousness of Roth’s fictional approach. That one can read the novel as either Zionist at its core, or anti-Zionist (like Lazare), bespeaks the complexity of the Middle East crisis and suggests the concomitant inner tensions that plague thoughtful Jewish-Americans like Philip Roth. To my mind, there can be little doubt that Roth, at least to some extent, implicates both stone-throwing Arabs and gun-wielding Israeli soldiers as Roth (the protagonist) simultaneously observes from his hotel room Arab rock gatherers and armed Israeli soldiers heading toward the West Bank to have it out.

Philip Roth’s precise moral perspective remains intentionally ambiguous in both of his Middle East novels to reflect the moral conundrum that is the Middle East itself. In *Operation Shylock*, for example, the murkiness of the characters reflects the murkiness of the Middle East, as Roth envisions it (Ziad, it appears, may be an Israeli informant playing the role of a Palestinian radical; Roth’s double may also be a Mossad operative setting the stage for Roth’s hazily disclosed mission in Athens to expose Jewish financial supporters of the PLO). Both of the novels’ strengths, I would argue, lie in Roth’s extensive depiction of this murkiness. It is just this lack of a satisfyingly clear moral perspective of the Middle East which dogs thoughtful Jewish and non-Jewish intellectuals today. Moreover, Roth deserves credit for entering the fray at all. Toward the end of *Operation Shylock*, the Mossad operative, Smilesburger, admonishes the American Jews’ complacency when it comes to matters of the Middle East:

You are free to indulge your virtue freely. Go to wherever you feel most blissfully unblamable. That is the delightful luxury of the utterly transformed American Jew. Enjoy it. You are that marvelous, unlikely, most magnificent phenomenon, the truly liberated Jew. The

Jew who is not accountable. . . . you are the blessed Jew condemned to nothing, least of all to our historical struggle. (OS 352)

Smilesburger, indeed, could easily be referring to Jewish-American writers, who, as a group, have largely ignored Israel in their work until recently. Roth, to his credit, engages the “historical struggle” in both of his Middle East novels by assessing the considerable accomplishments and the more troublesome failings of the Jewish state (and only occasionally lapsing into what current post-colonial critics would call, “colonialist discourse”). Several critics have given Roth his due in this regard. In a review of *Operation Shylock*, John Updike comments, “Relentlessly honest, Roth recruits raw nerves, perhaps, because they make the fiercest soldiers in the battle of truth” (111). Reflecting upon both of Roth’s Israel novels, Hillel Halkin notes that the “sheer, almost abstract passion for being Jewish seems to grow stronger in Roth’s work all the time” (“How to Read” 48), while Sanford Pinsker commends Roth for “wrenching Jewish-American fictions about Israel from the conventional pieties into which they have too often fallen” (“They Dream” 8–X). Most interestingly, perhaps, Cynthia Ozick—a staunch Zionist who has little use for its current “post” prefix, thank you—could not say enough good things about *Operation Shylock* in a recent interview: “[*Operation Shylock*] is totally amazing, in language, intellect, plotting, thesis, analysis, reach, daring. . . . He’s now the boldest American writer alive” (“An Interview” 394). All of which is simply to say that Philip Roth’s *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock* show just how far Jewish-American fiction on Israel has come since Leon Uris’s *Exodus*, and suggest the directions in which we can expect it to go in the not too distant future. I pursue perhaps the most prevalent of these new directions—the Jewish-American feminist approach toward Israel—in the final two chapters below.

Chapter 10

CONCLUSION

In my introduction to this study, I suggested that our present outcropping of Jewish-American novels on Israel marks the beginning of a renaissance in Jewish-American fiction. This contention, I am sure, seems rife with hyperbole to several readers, or at least seems premature. To bring this study to a satisfactory conclusion, then, I would like to elaborate upon my initial, optimistic reflections. It strikes me that two essential questions beg to be asked: (1) what happened to Jewish-American literature in the first place, that it should need a renaissance? and (2) what leads one to believe that the recent Jewish-American literature on Israel heralds in this renaissance?

The answer to this first question, I believe, lies in what we might call the cunning of history. For, curiously, the Jewish-American novel moved from the center of the American literary scene toward its periphery at precisely the same time that American Jews eschewed their peripheral, or marginalized, status in America to join the mainstream. Indeed, it was just that nagging sense of alienation in America that provided the essential grist for the fictional mills of those dazzling post-immigrant writers—Henry Roth, Grace Paley, Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and others. These writers were driven by what Irving Howe called an “inescapable subject”: “the judgment, affection and hatred they bring to bear upon the remembered world of their youth, and the costs extracted by their struggle to tear themselves away” (“Introduction” 3). Consider, for example, Saul Bellow’s memorable protagonist, Moses Herzog. We first meet him long after he has extricated himself from this “remembered world.” He is a History professor with solid academic and financial credentials. That said, his alienation from mainstream America prompts him to reflect upon the virtues of his materially impoverished but emotionally rich upbringing on Napoleon Street: “Here was a wider range of human feelings than he had ever again been

able to find. . . . What was wrong with Napoleon Street? thought Herzog. All he ever wanted was there" (Bellow, *Herzog* 140).

True, Bellow's *Herzog* (1964) distinguishes itself from other Jewish-American novels in the same stylistic and even thematic ways that separate Bellow's work from, well, any work that one of his contemporaries has produced. However, through Moses Herzog, Bellow engages the tension that earmarks so much of the post-immigrant Jewish-American fiction written primarily between the 1930s and 1960s. These writers almost invariably depicted characters who were both beleaguered by their hyphenated identity as Americans and ambivalent about the degrees to which they should embrace the Jewish and American side of that hyphen. The Jewish-American novel enjoyed its heyday during this prolific period, as the specific cultural burdens of the alienated Jew resonated for mainstream readers. That is to say, while a Moses Herzog (or a David Schearl, an Asa Leventhal, a Morris Bober, a Neil Klugman . . .) suffered from his own distinct brand of alienation, his culturally specific *tsores* seemed to many to cast the human condition at large in sharp, dramatic focus.

This golden age in Jewish-American literature could only last so long. As mainstream America became more and more hospitable toward American Jews and the post-immigrant consciousness of marginality and alienation dimmed, Jewish-American writers had no choice but to search for new "inescapable subjects." As Alvin Rosenfeld observed more than twenty years ago,

The many legitimate themes created for literature by the immigrant trauma—themes of cultural displacement and discontinuity, of the trials of readjustment in a new land, the embarrassments and excitements of discovery, the early years of sweatshop toil and the middle years of business accomplishment or intellectual pre-eminence, the spiritual failures that can come with worldly success—these and many more constituted a literature of authentic interest at one time among Jewish writers and readers, but it is an interest that has largely since lapsed or been taken over by the other minority-group writers, who are now searching to find their own expression for it. ("The Progress" 119)

Rosenfeld and others, like Ruth Wisse (see "American Jewish Writing, Act II"), anticipated that the next wave of Jewish-American literature would look decidedly more "Jewish"—that having explored the outside

world of mainstream America, Jewish-American writers would increasingly look inward. "The next frontier for American Jewry," Alfred Marcus asserts in 1973, "will be an internal one. . . . We have surely seen enough of the individual Jew as everyman, the Jew lost in an alien world; we require, at this point, a sense of community, of the people" (4–5). The theologically oriented Jewish-American literature that cropped up in the 1970s and 1980s bore out the predictions of Marcus, Rosenfeld, and Wisse. Several writers like Steve Stern, Curt Leviant, Allegra Goodman, Melvin Jules Bukiet, Nessa Rapoport, and Rebecca Goldstein followed Cynthia Ozick's lead to explore Jewish liturgy, values, and traditions in their fiction.

Jewish-American literature, then, certainly survived the success of American Jews. What is more, amid our zeitgeist which extols cultural particularism, most scholars of Jewish-American literature have welcomed the new "Jewish" Jewish-American literature. Any scholar in the field not itching for a fight these days knows well enough to deride the mere "ethnic" Jewish-American literature of the post-immigrant ilk. But whatever positive things one may have to say about Jewish-American fiction's second wave, one must also reckon with the decline of widespread interest in the Jewish-American novel that accompanied this second wave. Marcus, for one, read the writing on the wall when he anticipated in 1973 that the next internal frontier of Jewish-American literature "may, let us face it, have only a limited audience, and . . . will probably not reach the best-seller lists" (4).

Now, Marcus fretted little over the likely prospect that the new work of Jewish-American writers would appeal to a more narrow, mostly Jewish, audience, and I share his disinclination to gauge the quality of literature solely by its general popularity. One need only glance down the *New York Times* best-seller list to remind oneself that literary merit and popular appeal rarely go hand in hand. That the second wave of Jewish-American writers heeded Ozick's call for a literature "centrally Jewish in its concerns" and, in the bargain, enriched the canon of Jewish-American literature is true enough ("Toward" 174). It is also true, however, that as these contemporary writers turned inward to explore the fictional possibilities of the theological imagination, they simultaneously turned their attention away from mainstream America and the secular Jewish experience in mainstream America. This public realm was a central concern of Jewish-American writers during the boom period of the Jewish-American novel in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s.

Philip Roth, writing in 1961, brooded over his responsibility to depict the “American reality”:

[T]he American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make *credible* much of American reality. . . . The actuality is continually out-doing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist. Who, for example, could have invented Charles Van Doren? Roy Cohn and David Schine? Sherman Adams and Bernard Goldfine? Dwight David Eisenhower? (“Writing American Fiction” 177)

One can scarcely picture one of our young contemporary Jewish-American writers expressing such anxious sentiments. As I have already suggested, their culturally specific agenda has all but precluded their engaging mainstream American figures and issues. Ted Solotaroff underscored this general trend recently while introducing the stories he and Nessa Rapoport decided to include in *Writing Our Way Home: Contemporary Stories by American Jewish Writers*. He notes, “There is a relatively vacant area in which we found very few stories to consider and none that met the standards of our individual tastes. This is the recent public realm” (“The Open Community” xxv). Solotaroff, unlike Marcus before him, regrets the contemporary Jewish-American writers’ neglect of the public realm and attributes the neglect partly to the “general withdrawal of interest from political, economic, social, and intellectual concerns in recent American writing . . .” (xxvi).

Scholars might haggle over the degree to which Jewish-American writers partake in a general American literary trend as they neglect the public realm. But of one thing we can be certain. The trend does not bespeak a concomitant American Jewish apathy toward the public realm. To be sure, American Jews continue to grapple on their own distinct terms with a host of mainstream issues. I am thinking, specifically, of the heightened tensions between Jewish and African Americans, the influx of Russian Jews into Jewish-American neighborhoods, the ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia, the curious alliance between Jewish neoconservatives and the Christian right, and, of course, the turmoil in the Middle East.

The intuitive reader may have just inferred why I see a renaissance afoot for Jewish-American literature. For thankfully, the recent Jewish-American fiction on Israel suggests that “political, economic, social, and

intellectual concerns” have once again begun to spark the Jewish-American imagination. The Middle East, that is, represents the most promising site at which Jewish-American writers presently engage the public realm. It comes as little surprise that Israel should serve this function. After all, some of the most pressing dramas that define our culture play themselves out in the Middle East. To wit, if one were to update Roth’s list of personages above, one might very well include several names enmeshed in the Middle East crisis and etched into our nation’s collective psyche: Yasir Arafat, Jonathan Pollard, Baruch Goldstein, Yigal Amir, John Demjanjuk, Hanan Ashrawi, Edward Said, Yitzhak Rabin, and Shimon Peres. Forget Charles Van Doren! Who, indeed, could have invented *these* public figures? Perhaps no one. But Roth, Roiphe, and Reich, to their credit, have already begun to imagine these figures, or compelling composites, in their fiction.

I suspect that additional Jewish-American writers will follow their lead to engage the Middle East and the other public issues listed above which daily inform Jewish life in America. Jews, after all, continue to take on public issues with an intellectual intensity and moral rigor that far outweighs Jewish numbers. Jewish-American writers must take on these issues, as well. Until they do, the mosaic of Jewish-American literature, brilliant though it may be, will remain incomplete.