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The Text as Homeland¹

A Reading of Philip Roth's The Counterlife and Operation Shylock

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Home is where my book is.

Bernard Malamud, *The Tenants*.

The Counterlife and *Operation Shylock*, two highly provocative novels, published in 1986 and 1993, are brilliant reorchestrations of Roth's familiar themes and mark a turning point in his career. Here for the first time the action takes place in Israel, as if, turning away from his Native New Jersey, the author wished to explore new areas of Jewish experience. His speculations on the existential nature of the self and on the meaning of his Jewish identity take on broader and graver implications as they are projected against the backdrop of Israel, that historically and emotionally charged territory,² which if we are to believe Vladimir Yankelevitch, constitutes an icon of the Jewish ethos.³

In both novels the description of Israel is a pretext for pondering on the issues of anti-Semitism and Jewish self-hatred and for opposing Zionism and the Diaspora in a debate whose seriousness is undercut, however, by the comic perspective and by the use of metafiction that constantly blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality.⁴

Despite these similarities, the two novels, written within seven years of each other, somewhat differ in genre, tone and outlook. While the journey to the Jewish homeland constitutes a mere episode in *The Counterlife*, it covers almost the totality of *Operation Shylock*. In one case the point of view is that of Nathan Zuckerman, Roth's favorite character and alter ego; in the other, an outrageous pseudo-autobiography, the author chooses to appear under his own name as he relates his improbable adventures in a country then faced with the rise of the "Intifada." Despite an increased use of the farcical and the burlesque, anxiety prevails in *Operation Shylock*; the novel rephrases with extreme

urgency the questions posed in *The Counterlife* while it seems to challenge the conclusions and strategies previously proposed.

What do these differences reveal about Roth's perception of his allegiances and responsibilities as a Jew and an artist? This is the question that will guide my analysis.

CONFLICTING VISIONS OF "THE PROMISED LAND"
IN *THE COUNTERLIFE*

As it contrasts visions of Israel, America and England, *The Counterlife* dramatizes the quest for a territory where the (Jewish) self might reach a sense of authenticity, unity and plenitude. Extremely complex in its structure, the narrative juxtaposes four incongruous existential possibilities for Nathan Zuckerman and his brother, Henry, two characters who keep opposing each other in their eager attempts to instill meaning into their lives. In the first chapter "Basel," Henry, a successful dentist and supposedly devoted father and husband, is faced with a choice between taking beta-blockers that make him impotent and undergoing dangerous by-pass surgery; he chooses the operation and dies. In the following chapter, "Judea," he is, so to speak, resurrected into a sort of counter-Henry, who has deserted his family and even the mistress for whom he wanted to be operated on, in order to join a group of fierce nationalist settlers on the West Bank. By the middle of the book the roles are reversed and the narrative flow abruptly redirected: it is now suggested that it was in fact Nathan who chose risky surgery for the sake of his mistress ("he [. . .] was the fool who died for a fuck," [259]); the previous chapters were but part of a fiction he had invented, disguising himself as his brother so as to displace his own anguish. Most of what follows is a continuation of Nathan's manuscript. In one version he dies, in the other he writes for himself a future of survival and progeny in England with Maria, the Christian woman for whom he has risked his life.

As the novel develops it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between these interpenetrating though logically irreconcilable narrative planes and to determine whose fiction, or whose life, one is reading: does not Henry mentally compose "a kind of counterbook" (234) in the furor that seizes him as he reads his brother's notes? Does not Maria declare to Nathan's ghost at the end of the novel: "Now it's my turn to invent you"? (290). In this decentered fluctuating novel, the contract between author and reader "gets torn at the end of each chapter [. . .] you never get to the bottom of things" (Milbauer and Watson, [11]).

As most critics have observed⁵ the intricate structure enables Roth to confront various modes of response to Jewishness, none of which is allowed to

prevail upon the others. Each definition of Jewish identity is systematically juxtaposed to its antithesis and viewed from a critical distance, while the troubled relation between reality and fiction raises doubts about its validity.

In the long “Judea” section, the conflict between the two brothers serves as a means to oppose mutual perceptions of America and Israel. The argument between Nathan and Henry is rephrased in larger historical and political terms by divergent Israeli voices: that of Nathan’s friend, Shuki, an Israeli moderate, and that of Lippman, the fierce “Gush Emunim” leader of whom Henry has become the disciple.

Henry describes his decision to start a new life in Israel as an attempt to escape the alienation of his conventional American life (“my grotesque apology for a life,” 120) through a return to the world of his Jewish origins and through active participation in the collective history of his people: “*Me* no longer exists out here [. . .]—here Judea counts, not *me*” (118). He and Lippman assert their faith in the familiar Zionist assumption that it is only in Israel that the Jew can assert his independence, affirm his dignity and liberate himself from “all the Jewish ‘abnormalities,’ those peculiarities of self-division” (134) that afflict him in the Diaspora.

The settlers’ exalted rhetoric is, however, derided by Nathan who chooses to view things from a strictly individual and psychological point of view: to him, Henry’s transformation into a Zionist is mere play-acting (“the part you seem to have assigned to yourself in the tribal epic,” [122]), it amounts in fact to trading one set of self-delusions for another; Nathan interprets it as a belated rebellion against their father (125), a convenient justification for Henry’s desertion of his family (126) and a grotesque substitute for his unfulfilled desire to escape to Basel with his dental assistant (“Classic. The Jewish male’s idolatry-worship of the Shiksa,” [124]). In his opinion, the only historical origins he and Henry may refer to is “the kitchen table in Newark” (155). The writer goes as far as to draw a parallel between the Zionist dream of establishing a Jewish homeland in Palestine and “the unpolitical, unideological ‘family Zionism’” (60) enacted by his European grandparents when they chose to immigrate to America.⁶ He claims that life in the Diaspora should be recognized as an undeniable component of Jewish history:

It may be that flourishing mundanely in the civility and security of South Orange, more or less forgetful from one day to the next of your Jewish origins but remaining identifiably a Jew, you were making Jewish history no less astonishing as theirs, though without quite knowing it every moment and without having to say it. (165)

Zuckerman finds it quite amusing that he, the fierce satirist of the Jewish American middle class, should be perceived in Agor as one of its most typical

representatives (“as though I had a walk-on role as Diaspora straight man,” [113]). He is appalled, however, by Lippman’s caricatured vision of Jewish life in America for it unintentionally espouses the very anti-Semitic clichés the man seeks to denounce (164–165). With his excesses and paranoia (he goes as far as to predict a general pogrom in the US) Lippman appears in fact to Nathan as an embodiment of those Jewish “abnormalities” he claims to abhor.

That shift of the “normalcy” concept from Israel to the Diaspora is even more radical in Shuki’s embittered statements on the Jewish homeland:

This is the *homeland* of Jewish abnormality. Worse: now *we* are the dependent Jews, on your money, your lobby, on our big allowance from Uncle Sam [. . .] while you are the Jews living [. . .] without apology, without shame and perfectly *independent* [. . .] a Jew like you lives securely, without real fear of persecution or violence, while we are living just the kind of imperiled Jewish existence that we came here to replace. (81–82)

This pessimistic view is confirmed by Nathan’s encounters either with down-right eccentrics (like Jimmy, the lunatic who urges him to help hijack their plane), or with people bearing deep physical or psychological scars⁷ that attest to the heavy toll the country exacts from its inhabitants.

Yet the conflict remains unresolved: Nathan’s passionate defense of Jewish life in America is in ridiculous contradiction with his own decision to settle in England with his fourth Christian wife. Ironically enough, his encounter with the muffled prejudices of the English middle class forces him to acknowledge what he kept denying both in Israel and in America: the reality of anti-Semitism as well as his own ties to Judaism, even though he may not be able to define the concept in any satisfying way: “England’s made a Jew of me in only eight weeks [. . .] A Jew, without Jews, without Judaism, without Zionism, without Jewishness, without a temple or an army or even a pistol, a Jew clearly without a home, just the object itself, like a glass or an apple.” (370)

The painful quandary of Jewish identity is, however, transcended through a postmodern affirmation of the contingent, protean and elusive nature of the self.⁸ The intricacies of the structure, the recurrent motif of role-playing as well as Nathan’s conclusions at the end of the novel suggest that, in his very efforts to reach authenticity and meaning, each character is led by personal and historical circumstances to elaborate fictions about himself and others:

It’s *all* impersonation—in the absence of a self, one impersonates selves, and, after a while impersonates best the self that best gets one through. (386)

If there even is a natural being, an irreducible self, it is rather small I think, and may even be the root of all impersonations. (386)

Whether it be Henry's erotic fantasies in "Basel," Nathan's dream of a conventional family life in "Gloucestershire," or even the settlers' exalted nationalist ideal (Roth is not afraid of desecrating myths), it all boils down to the same: "The construction of a counterlife that is one's own antimyth" (167). Whether personal or collective, all dreams are discarded as mere avatars of the pastoral impulse ("a fantasy of innocence [. . .] in the perfect landscape, on the banks of the perfect stretch of river," [363]), as vain nostalgia for an impossible unity: "at the core is the idyllic scenario of redemption through the recovery of a sanitized, confusionless life" (368).

The frustration that may arise from such realizations is tempered by the obvious delight with which the superior artist (not only Zuckerman, of course, but also Philip Roth), ceaselessly accumulates incongruous versions of himself and others. As Debra Shostak aptly observes (1991, 208–9), the vocabulary of erotic pleasure fuses with that of linguistic invention at the end of the novel. It is through fiction that Nathan and Henry are restored to life and potency; it is through fiction that the subject preserves his freedom, resists appropriation by others (be they relatives or readers⁹) and makes sense of the conflicting political and cultural discourses surrounding him. To the mythical hills of Judea, to the fresh meadows of England or the familiar streets of Newark, Philip Roth prefers the boundless rhizomatic¹⁰ expanse of his ceaselessly transforming text: a territory where self and other, truth and illusion, seriousness and laughter, Exile and Return are allowed to coexist at last in a successfully integrated whole. This "obsessive reinvention of the real" (281) is the author's most vibrant homage to the inexhaustible diversity of life¹¹ as well as to the resilience and self-regenerating power of the human spirit. It constitutes, according to him, the only means through which the truth may be approached:

We are all writing fictitious versions of our lives, all the time, contrary but mutually entangling stories that, however subtly or grossly falsified, constitute our hold on reality and are the closest thing we have to the truth. (Milbauer and Watson, [11–12])

As he deconstructs the myth of the integrity of the self ("The whole Western idea of mental health," [365]) and derides both Zionism and the dream of assimilation, Philip Roth proposes a myth of the artist as supreme inventor and manipulator.

However, the tone of triumph that prevails at the end of *The Counterlife* should not lead one to overlook the somewhat puzzling details. *In the very fiction he has invented* the writer finds himself confronted with solitude and failure: his relatives, characters and readers, raise serious questions about the morality of his artistic stance (Henry views it as fratricide, Maria as betrayal),

and they eventually turn away from him. Moreover the incantatory celebration of circumcision in Nathan's final letter to Maria undeniably suggests what the book has so far consistently denied: the inevitability of allegiance—as if the artist's playful impersonations were not as interchangeable as he wishes them to be:

Well, that's over. The pastoral stops here and it stops with circumcision [. . .] maybe that's what the Jews had in mind and what makes the act seem quintessentially Jewish and the mark of their reality. Circumcision makes it as clear as can be that you are here and not there, that you are out and not in—also that you're mine and not theirs. There's no way around it. (371)

*OPERATION SHYLOCK: "A NEW LOGIC
FOR MY JEWISH PILGRIMAGE"?*¹²

The ambiguities kept subjacent in *The Counterlife* re-emerge with full force in *Operation Shylock*, a novel that probes further into the complexities of Jewish identity and history. No longer restricted to a debate between Zionism and the Diaspora, Roth's reflection now focuses on issues briefly referred to in *The Counterlife*: the shadow of the Holocaust and the conflict between Israelis and Arabs. Roth's choice to confront these questions without hiding behind a fictional character this time proves a risky enterprise, judging from the changes in tone as one passes from one book to the next: here vaudeville often turns into nightmare, laughter is indissociable from terror. Familiar themes and tropes are strangely distorted. The "operation" motive, for example, a structuring trope in *The Counterlife*, as we've seen, takes on a new meaning: it now refers to a dangerous spying mission allegedly undertaken by the writer and expands into frightful visions of emotional collapse, terminal cancer and death. Likewise circumcision, "that delicate surgery [. . .] performed [. . .] upon the glory of a newborn body" (*The Counterlife*, 369), is now replaced by grotesque evocations of penile implantation, mutilation and necrophilia. It is in fact as if Philip Roth were led to test the efficiency of his "literary surgery" (*The Counterlife*, 358) as he plunges into the raw reality of a country shot through with conflict, threatened from within and without, and under constant trial. In this novel, the real debate is between the writer and himself.¹³

A mixture of fictional elements, historical references and autobiographical fragments, the plot describes the farcical encounter of the author's fictional persona with an impostor who usurps his name in Jerusalem in order to promote "Diasporism"—an absurd program that is at once a parody and a reversal of Zionism since it advocates resettlement in the European Diaspora as the only means to avert a second Holocaust perpetrated this time by the Arabs.

The opposition between the writer and his double is paralleled by the implicit dialogue between other divergent voices: George Ziad, a former friend of Philip Roth's, now connected with the PLO, launches into fierce diatribes against the Jewish state and denounces the Israelis' view of their history ("this obsessive narrative of theirs," [133]) as pure falsification. The Zionist cause is defended by Smilesburger, a ruthless Mossad operative. Unlike what happens in *The Counterlife*, there is no Shuki here, no moderate voice or friendly presence to appease the violence of the debate. All arguments have turned into grotesque caricatures. All characters are shameless manipulators who merely wish to exploit the writer's reputation and to absorb him into their cause. They plunge him into a state of anxiety all the more unbearable since he has barely recovered from a serious nervous breakdown.

As the paranoid plot unfolds, the instability of the narrative voice as well as the increasingly intricate game of doubles make it impossible to draw the line between the authentic and the counterfeit, between life and art. The book's introduction, in which the story is presented as "an account [. . .] of actual occurrences" (13), is belied by a final "Note to the Reader" stating that "this confession is false" (399). Within the narrative itself all the characters eventually merge in a grotesque fusion of opposites. Philip Roth—one hardly knows whom the name refers to—repeatedly usurps the identity of his impostor and espouses his absurd theories ("employing the disguise of my own face and name," [129]). George Ziad, the Palestinian, is suspected of being an Israeli spy. As for Smilesburger, the Mossad agent, his cynicism leads him to develop historical views strangely similar to those of Ziad.¹⁴ The impossibility of distinguishing between truth and lies, innocence and guilt, is underlined by numerous references to the Demjanuk trial where all testimonies are forged and the identity of the defendant cannot be established.

Yet, as a critic aptly observes, in Israel, identity is not merely a literary or philosophical issue, it "can become a matter of life or death" (Savin, 140): "Who are you? . . . Palestinians? Jews?" cries the author in terror when kidnapped by people whose motives he cannot penetrate and who might as well be after his impostor. Likewise, he feels threatened in his very existence by that double in Jerusalem whose real nature he cannot ascertain: "Pipik was protean, a hundred different things" (185).¹⁵

To retain his composure and sanity, the writer turns to invention and writing. He tries to reduce the frightening double to words, by renaming him Pipik, "a benignly deflating Yiddish nickname out of the daily comedy of his humble childhood world that translates literally into Moses Bellybutton" (242). He barricades himself in his hotel room to prepare questions for his interview with the Israeli writer Aharon Appelfeld. He writes an introduction for the diary of Leon Klinghoffer, the Achille Lauro martyr, to resist his fear of his mysterious

abductors. Eventually, the writing of his Israeli adventures permits him to recover his balance: "I am myself again, solidly back on my own ground" (383).

The recovery is precarious, however, and the relief only momentary. The writer remains haunted by Pipik long after the impostor's death ("Pipik will follow me all the days in my life and I will dwell in the house of Ambiguity for ever," [307]). His inability to recover control through language is underlined by his constant impression of being a character in someone else's plot, whether it be Pipik's, Ziad's or Smilesburger's ("they are running me without my knowing it!, [290]). He, the manipulator and magician of words has been turned into a textual object ("without the least control over this narrative ping-pong in which I appear as the little white ball," [359]); his voice has been covered by the fierce vehemence of all those around him:

Where everything is words, you'd think I'd have some mastery and know my way around, but all this churning hatred, each man a verbal firing squad, immeasurable suspicions, a flood of mocking angry talk, all of life a vicious debate, conversations in which there is nothing that cannot be said . . . no I'd be better off in the jungle where a roar is a roar and one is hard put to miss its meaning. (150)

All this violence and passion force the writer to confront the ultimate consequence of his postmodern stance: language from which he expects relief is also the medium for all distortions. Did not Shakespeare, by creating the character of Shylock, forever imprint on the mind of Gentiles the image of the Jew as villain? Did not Jewish writers provide in return just as deformed an image of the Goy ("as drunkard, wife-beater, as the coarse, brutal semisavage who is 'not in control of himself,'"? [212]). Quite significantly the writer's vibrant celebration of the power of language ("an associative grab bag of inexhaustible proportions," [322]) takes place in the deserted classroom where he is imprisoned. As he confronts the unintelligible Hebrew sentence written on the blackboard (one that refers to Jacob's fight against a mysterious enemy) the writer realizes that, whether it be English or Hebrew, language, as "cultural artifact" is "by definition the language of the other" (Shostak, 1997, 735). Therefore writing can provide no escape from the tensions of life: "There is no neutral territory" (328). The withdrawal into aesthetics is doomed to failure.

While it comforts his postmodern sense of the "unsureness of everything," the Israeli experience paradoxically forces the writer to acknowledge the limits of his artistic stance. When brutalized, and fearing for his life, when confronted with survivors of the Holocaust he comes to suspect that, outside subjective construction, there might after all be historical facts of an unquestionable nature. As Aharon Appelfeld puts it:

Reality as you know, is always stronger than the human imagination. Not only that, reality can permit itself to be unbelievable, inexplicable, out of proportion. The created work, to my regret cannot permit itself that. (86)

In the ruthless world of facts, one has to choose one's side. The crucial question "where is Philip Roth?" (22) seems to be answered at last when the writer eventually yields to Smilesburger's pressures: first he agrees to participate in "Operation Shylock," an "anti-Diasporist" spying mission; later on he consents to a sacrifice he compares to the taking away of a pound of his flesh: he obliterates from his novel all details of this adventure.

Did "Philip Roth" sacrifice his artistic freedom to his "Jewish conscience" as Smilesburger puts it? Or was the alleged spying mission just another means to gratify his gift for impersonation and manipulation?¹⁶ It is up to the reader to determine the true nature of "Operation Shylock."

Both *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock* attest to the passion with which Philip Roth investigates the meaning of his Jewishness and the sense of his mission as a writer. In both novels he chooses the text as his sole province as he tries to come to terms with what he perceives as the fundamental divisiveness of the Jewish condition¹⁷ and of the human condition in general. Yet the myth of the artist that he proposes in *The Counterlife* does not resist his closer encounter with Israeli reality in *Operation Shylock*. Whether this reversal is serious or not, what counts most for Philip Roth is to preserve a vital dialogue between argument and counter-argument, between Self and Other, between text and reader. For it is from the ceaseless confrontation of viewpoints that consciousness may arise. Doubt constitutes the very essence of life.

"We work in the dark. We do what we can. We give what we have. Our doubt is our passion and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art."¹⁸

NOTES

1. This title is inspired by the famous article by George Steiner: "Our Homeland the Text."
2. For an historical review of the various meanings ascribed to the land of Israel from biblical to modern times, see, for example, *Israël Imaginaire*.
3. Vladimir Yankelevitch. "Un état comme les autres?" (*Israël dans la conscience juive*, 13–15).
4. "[. . .] there is no clear demarcation between actual happenings eventually consigned to the imagination from imaginings that are treated as having actually occurred" (*The Counterlife*, 264).

5. Robert Alter, Andrew Furman, or Naomi Sokoloff, for example.
6. [. . .] simple Galicia tradesmen, who, at the end of the last century had on their own reached the same conclusion as Theodor Herzl—that there was no future for them in Christian Europe [. . .]. But instead of struggling to save the Jewish people from destruction by founding a homeland in the remote corner of the Ottoman empire that had once been biblical Palestine, they simply set out to save their own Jewish skins [. . .] this was their brand of Zionism. And it worked. (59)
7. To mention only a few examples, a taxi driver shows Nathan a picture of the son he has lost in the army (106). Likewise Shuki has lost an eye and an ear in the war; he cannot get over the loss of his brother killed and horribly mutilated by the Syrians (70); he is enraged at his son's decision to sacrifice his musical career to what he views as his duty to country.
8. For a theoretical discussion of Jewish identity in a post-modern context see Richard Shusterman: "NEXT YEAR IN JERUSALEM? Postmodern Jewish Identity and the myth of Return." (*Jewish Identity*, 291–308).
9. Even as Henry and Maria, in different ways, try to appropriate Nathan's manuscript, they realize that they are merely performing the role the supreme artist had anticipated for them: "his version, his interpretation, his picture refuting and impugning everyone else's and swarming over everything!" (264).
10. The adjective is borrowed from Deleuze, the French philosopher (*Mille Plateaux*): it refers to protean decentered structures that challenge all notions of origin or ending and for which parataxis is the most suitable expression.
11. "The burden isn't either/or, consciously choosing from possibilities equally difficult and regrettable—it's and/and/and/and/and as well. Life is and: the accidental and the predictable, the actual and the potential, all the multiplying realities, entangled, overlapping, colliding, conjoined—plus the multiplying illusions" (TC, 350).
12. *Operation Shylock* (358).
13. My argument is inspired by the theories of the French critic, Charles Mauron, who establishes a link between an artist's "obsessive metaphors" and the "personal myth" he chooses to construct for himself.
14. See page 350 for example: "we have done unto the Palestinians what the Christians have done unto us, systematically transformed them into the despised and subjugated Other, thereby depriving them of their human status [. . .] the fact is this: as a people the Palestinians are totally innocent and as a people the Jews are totally guilty."
15. The man is alternately seen as a paranoid delusion, as an incarnation of the "repressed other," as some mysterious materialization of the artist's fictional characters or, on the contrary, as the incarnation of his unliterary self ("I AM THE YOU THAT IS NOT WORDS," 87).
16. Quite significantly, Smilesburger draws an extended parallel between the art of spying and that of writing (346).

17. "But inside every Jew there is a mob of Jews [. . .]" (334).
 18. Henry James, "The Middle Years." This passage constitutes one of the main intertextual references in *The Ghost Writer*.

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