PHILIP ROTH IN CONTEXT

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CHAPTER 15

Israel

Leona Toker

Since its establishment in 1948, the State of Israel claimed Philip Roth's allegiance. The allegiance was granted, but with reservations. Despite his satirical treatment of his New Jersey cultural environment, Roth loved his birthplace and had not much love left over for Israel, which his avatar Nathan Zuckerman sees as an "unharmonious" country, "where it appears that nothing, from the controversy to the weather, is ever blurred or underdone,"[1] yet which somehow makes demands on an American Jew.

In *Patrimony* Roth recollects his parents' pride over the birth of the Jewish state. When reading the daily paper, his father always turns to the news from Israel first. In *The Counterlife* Zuckerman's father is shown to be proud of the Israeli victory in the Six-Day War of 1967. Such pride was usually accompanied by the belief in a new kind of Jew, economically needy but a warrior rather than a compliant diasporic survivor. In *Portnoy's Complaint* the protagonist's sister collects for the National Fund of Israel;[2] Roth's Zuckerman remembers having done it too, thinking about "the hearty Jewish teenagers" in pre-1948 Palestine, "reclaiming the desert and draining the swamps."[3] Roth's cousin Sanford Kuvin (mentioned in *Patrimony*) conducted his research in Israel for a long time and raised an endowment for what is now the Center for the Study of Infectious and Tropical Diseases in the Hadassah Medical School, bearing Kuvin's name.

Roth himself visited Israel many times, most importantly in 1988, when he interviewed the novelist Aharon Appelfeld, witnessed the First Intifada, attended the Demjanjuk trial and, in the company of Bernard Avishai, met with the future prime minister Ehud Olmert in the Knesset. He studied Israel's past and present, and his interest in its complex experience is reflected in several of his novels. When Portnoy conducts a struggle against a TV quiz fraud, he likens himself and his associates to "the Stern gang" (*PC*, 233), an extremist anti-British splinter group ("Fighters for the Freedom of Israel") founded by Avraham Stern in 1940. In *The Counterlife*, of all the Swiss towns that could serve as the home of Henry Zuckerman's sexually

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liberating extramarital lover, the author chooses Basel, where the First Zionist Congress took place in 1897. On the bookshelf of the writer's studio in *Deception*, among other books "about Jews, by Jews, for Jews"[4] (a submerged ironic allusion to Lincoln's Gettysburg Address), there is *White Nights*, Menachem Begin's account of his prison and camp experience in the Soviet Union.[5] Nathan Zuckerman of *The Counterlife* sees Begin as an ultimate vindication of his father – a Jew of the old world, looking like "the owner of a downtown clothing store," with his "funny accent and his ugly looks and his alien ways," yet proving that "what matters now isn't what goyim think but what Jews do" (*CL*, 61). This allusion to the slogan of (Begin's adversary) David Ben-Gurion and other details of Israeli lore are off the beaten track and point to a quest for understanding that exceeds standard tourist curricula.

For American Jews in the first post–World War II decades, Israel had not been a Promised Land as it was for many Jews from the Eastern hemisphere. Instead, their haven was the USA, a stable democracy that accorded with their liberal values, and the locus of their success in transcending the immigrant condition. In the 1960s and the 1970s, under Jewish American eyes, Israel was often a destination for those undergoing a personal crisis. This is the case in the last chapter of Roth's novel *Portnoy's Complaint*, but the protagonist senses the implicit expectation that his trip to Israel should lead to his settling there. This makes him weep before landing – not out of excitement at approaching the Holy Land but out of the love for his Newark childhood world, which, for all his rebellion, he does not renounce.

Dutifully, Portnoy visits the highlights: "Tel Aviv, Jaffa, Jerusalem, Beer She'va, the Dead Sea, Sedom, Ein Gedi, then north to Caesarea, Haifa, Akko, Tiberias, Safed, the upper Galilee . . . and always it is more dreamy than real" (*PC*, 251–252). The sequence of the toponyms signifies that he travels to the Dead Sea via Beer Sheva rather than from Jerusalem down the Jericho road: the episode is set before the Six-Day War, when the short-cut from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea was still in Jordanian territory. Thus it is even before Israel got the (unfair) reputation for belligerence that the oversexed Portnoy is impotent with Israeli women, first with a willing though humorless army officer and then a kibbutz-bred idealist whom he angrily tries to rape. In recounting his earlier sexual conquests of gentile American women, Portnoy comes to the conclusion that he wished to "stick it up their backgrounds – as though through fucking [he would] discover America" (*PC*, 235), where the f-word stands not only for his "search for power"[6] but also, unsentimentally, for making love. With the

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Israeli girls, it is neither: Portnoy remains alien to their culture and cannot make love to it. His impotence is sometimes interpreted as caused by the would-be virile strength and confidence of the Israeli women, yet actually the sought confidence is his own: "Hey, here *we're* the WASPs!" he thinks (*PC*, 254). He finds, however, that an American Jew will not be immediately accorded cultural privilege in the Jewish state. Portnoy's healing will not be in Israel – "Where other Jews find refuge, sanctuary and peace, Portnoy now perishes! Where other Jews flourish, I now expire" (271) – but on the psychoanalyst's couch. Ironically, it is to England and Israel that Roth sent his parents to distance them from the storm unleashed by the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint*.

In terms of fictional chronology, Portnoy's visit to Israel is preceded by the 1960 episode in *The Counterlife*, set at the times when the prevailing Israeli mindset posited that all Jews should make Israel their home. The protagonist, Nathan Zuckerman, explains his resistance to this idea by reference to the generation of his grandparents:

> 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. 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. (*CL*, 57)

He adds that their "claim to legitimate political entitlement had not been staked in the midst of an alien, indigenous population that had no commitment to Jewish biblical rights" (58), forgetting that Palestinian inhabitants of Israel are not "indigenous" in the same way as the American First Nations. It is not so much bias and inaccuracy as the glibness of Zuckerman's monologue that makes his friend Shuki Elchanan's working-class father say, "Such deep thoughts, Nathan. I never in my life saw a better argument than you for our never leaving Jerusalem again" (*CL*, 59). By the time Zuckerman revisits Israel eighteen years later, the old man has died of a stroke after his other son was captured, mutilated, and killed by the Syrians during the Yom Kippur War of 1973.

In 1978 Nathan, now author of the best-selling *Carnovsky* (a shadow of *Portnoy's Complaint*), is on a mission to Israel to persuade his brother Henry to return to his wife and children in the USA: in a crisis after coronary by-pass surgery, Henry has joined Jewish settlers on the West Bank, south-east of Jerusalem. This is "a counterlife" to an alternative

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plot-line, where the surgery, chosen in preference to medicines that made Henry impotent, leads to his death. Like Portnoy, Henry has come to Israel with a self-therapeutic agenda; unlike Portnoy, he stays, reconnecting to what he sees as his roots. He is affected not by biblical landscapes or historical sites like the Wailing Wall but by the sing-song of the boys' study in a religious school, the *heder* – the continuity that he feels is with his East European ancestors rather than with ancient Israelites. Henry falls under the sway of a right-wing activist Mordecai Lippman and joins his community in the Agor settlement. The toponym Agor is fictional, reminiscent of "agora," the Hebrew for penny, as if to suggest the cheapness of the ideological choice.

Agor is situated in "Judea." The way people refer to the territories on the West Bank of the River Jordan, captured by Israel in the Six-Day War, indicates their political stance: "Judea and Samaria" are the terms used by the settlers, the right wing, and their sympathizers; the "Occupied Territories" (as in Roth's *Operation Shylock*) is the language of the left wing; "Disputed Territories" is a centrist legalese. Agor is supposed to be near Hebron, which suggests that it is part of the Gush Etzion group of settlements. These Jewish villages existed, on purchased land, before Israel's War of Independence of 1948; the Arab Legion captured them, massacred some of the defenders, and imprisoned others. Part of the leading re-settlers of Gush Etzion after the Six-Day War were the children of the defenders, evacuated before the final battle in the spring of 1948; for them, their villages have been *re*captured, "liberated" rather than "occupied."

The establishment of these and other Jewish settlements on the West Bank, continuing the agenda of the heroic pre-Independence pioneers yet now branded as illegitimate by international law, received further momentum after Begin's Likud party won the 1977 election. Roth's narrative is accurate about the settler's choice of commanding the hilltops, their communal cooperation, and their poultry industry.

Henry studies Hebrew in a settlement class and adopts the ideal of the return to Zion. Through this he seems to have found a meaning in life, though his brother believes it to be a psychological cover for leaving his wife. The brothers are invited to dinner at Lippman's, and the readers are treated to the host's ideological tirade, so monolithic that it remains unclear when Lippman eats. Paradoxically, many of the things that Lippman says about anti-Semitism and the Jews' wish "to determine their destiny like anybody else in a homeland of their own" (*CL*, 133) are not unreasonable; what Nathan Zuckerman mainly disapproves of is

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Lippman's gun-toting excursions to Bethlehem and Hebron. From the standpoint of the current near-consensus about the two-state solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Lippman's attitude is too intransigent: "the Arab can remain here and I can remain here and together we can live in harmony. He can have any experience he likes, live here however he chooses and have everything he desires – except for the experience of statehood" (133). Still, when Nathan's English-gentry wife Maria refers to Agor as "the Jewish heart of darkness" (267), Nathan does not accept the analogy between Lippman and Conrad's Kurtz – he prefers to compare the settler hothead not to Conrad's cruel and corrupt agent of colonialism but to Melville's fanatical Captain Ahab (268). At Lippman's dinner Zuckerman is struck dumb not because he is shocked by Lippman's views but because he feels "outclassed" by the host's rhetoric (134).

Yet Lippman's leadership emerges as failed: whereas a true leader fosters the intellectual growth of the people around him, Lipmann's followers voice narrow-minded hostilities. In his letter to Henry, Nathan remarks that Lippman's monologues "have an eerie reality and even while rejecting him one has to wonder if it's because what he says is wrong or because what he says is just unsayable" (149). A Holocaust survivor and a wounded veteran of the Six-Day War, Lippman, indeed, is not a liberal ironist in Richard Rorty's sense of recognizing the contingency of one's beliefs.[7] Nor are the people the fictionalized "Roth" meets in the 1993 novel *Operation Shylock* – except for the Mossad agent Smilesburger and, implicitly, the Holocaust child-survivor Aharon Appelfeld, the one Israeli writer for whom Roth, fictional and actual, has unqualified respect.[8] In a book replete with doubles, the devious but paternalistic Smilesburger may be read as the wise and staid Appelfeld's counterlife.

Operation Shylock is set in 1988. The *intifadah*, the Palestinian uprising in the West Bank and Gaza, has started; meanwhile, the country is riveted by TV broadcasts of the trial of Ivan Demjanjuk, a Cleveland auto-worker believed to have been the sadistic murderer Ivan the Terrible of Treblinka. The novel is constructed on the irony of situations. Close to the end, "Roth," the fictional extension of the author, is asked to write a foreword to the travel diary of Leon Klinghoffer, the wheelchair-bound American Jewish retired businessman who was shot and thrown overboard by Palestinian terrorists on the cruise ship *Achille Lauro* in 1985. The neat diary is a chronological list of activities and places visited prior to that fatal voyage, banal yet spare records of pride and appreciation, of the kind that officially organized tours of Israel seek to induce in the participants. Such generalized feelings are, indeed, shared by many Jewish tourists and new

immigrants who come prepared to love the country, but they are not the stuff of which great literature is made – until they are placed in an ironic perspective: they are ennobled when experienced by the man who would soon be singled out and murdered at age sixty-nine. It is a double irony, because the diary turns out to be concocted by a Mossad agent. Or perhaps the irony is triple, since the Israeli forger (in contrast to an American visitor) should have known the excitement of going to the Dead Sea from Jerusalem, past Jericho, rather than, like Portnoy before the Six-Day War, from Tel Aviv via Beer Sheva and Sodom. Or quadruple: amidst the hallucinatory paranoia of the novel's plot, the forged diary carries a reminder of the achievements of the still young state, balancing, albeit not quite efficiently, the cacophony of the novel's hatreds, suspicions of double and triple agency, and the turgidly verbose clashing ideological discourses that fall under the rubric of Roth's "thoroughness."[9]

What brings the fictionalized "Roth" to Israel in the winter of 1988 is the news that he is being impersonated by a look-alike who strives to reverse Zionism by what he calls Diasporism.[10] In *The Counterlife*, the paradox-loving Shuki Elchanan toys with the thought that Israelis are "the excitable, ghettoized, jittery little Jews of the Diaspora, and [American Jews] are the Jews with all the confidence and cultivation that comes of feeling at home where you are" (*CL*, 78). In *Operation Shylock* Roth's double, whom the "real Philip Roth" dubs "Moishe Pipik," takes this idea further: Zionism sought to save the Jews by bringing them back to their historical homeland, but Diasporism claims that this led to the formation of an international ghetto which, in view of the continued hostility of its Arab neighbors, would bring about another Holocaust. "Moishe Pipik" tries to initiate a plan for Ashkenazi Jews to return to their countries of origin (that thirst, as it were, to get them back), leaving the Sephardi Jews to blend with the Arab population. The plan is applauded and endorsed by "Roth's" former fellow student George Ziad (sometimes regarded as a take-off from Edward Said, though the novelist denied this), who has left his comfortable berth in American academia for the sake of his own counter-life in Ramallah, a life of continuous eloquent hatred for demonized arrogant occupying Israelis. Ziad offers "Roth" leads to Arafat in Tunis (the 1993 Oslo accords that would bring Arafat to Palestine are not yet in the cards) and to would-be "diasporist" Jewish supporters of the PLO in Europe. In the outcome of the plot, "Roth" accepts the Mossad's assignment to meet these donors in Athens. If his double is "the obvious trope for the inquiry into self-exposure,"[11] then his acceptance of the mission is a figurative expression of Roth's acceding to Israel's claim on his loyalties.

"Roth's" motivation may be similar to that of Lillian Hellman's authorial persona in "Julia" (in *Pentimento*), an impulse to acknowledge the demands of the struggle against Hitler's forces. In the novel's refraction of *The Merchant of Venice*,[12] "Roth" is Antonio, the debtor.

The pound of flesh exacted from "Roth" is the would-be fifteenth chapter of the novel, supposed to have described his experience in Athens. The protagonist suppresses this chapter at Smilesburger's request. Smilesburger appeals to "Roth" to remove the chapter from the book or to change its details and to format the narrative as fictional (which it is) in order not to endanger other Mossad agents or operations. He notes that, if the problematic chapter is published, the Mossad may orchestrate the destruction of Roth's reputation. "Roth" rejects this threat, although he knows how painful the attacks on him could be. Smilesburger's strongest argument, however, is the one deployed at an earlier meeting, in Jerusalem. While trying to recruit "Roth" for a one-time assignment, the old man launched, *á propos de rien*, a long discourse on the Polish nineteenth-century rabbi Israel Meir HaCohen Kagan, known as Chofets Chaim, author of, among other things, *Shmiras Haloshon* (guarding one's tongue/language), an essay whose import was contrary to the novelist's satirical practices. Chofets Chaim believed in abstaining from any sort of defamation of one's neighbor (and ultimately of oneself); he referred to the transgression of this rule as "the evil tongue," *lashon hara* (*loshon hora*, as the novel transliterates the Ashkenazi pronunciation). Implicitly, Roth's satire on Jewish American decencies can be seen as *loshon hora*, but Smilesburger refrains from mentioning this, even though he admits, as befits an ironist, that by accusing Jews of pleasure in bad-mouthing one another, he himself is committing that very sin. During their final meeting, set, appropriately, in an Ashkenazi Jewish diner in Manhattan, Smilesburger hints that he wants to protect "Roth" from becoming a victim of *loshon hora* but also from engaging in it, with destructive consequences for others. "Roth" first resists Smilesburger's request because it infringes on his artistic freedom. Yet the dialogue, and the novel itself, end with Smilesburger's advice, "Let your Jewish consciousness be your guide,"[13] and this punch-line suffices to explain the absence of the fifteenth chapter in what we have read. "Roth's" existentialist choice has been not just of a course of action but also of the set of values behind it: the reluctant sense of indebtedness, loveless loyalties, "Jewish consciousness," protectiveness of others in the face of the possible effect of art on life – all of these risk turning freedom into license and recasting the ideal of the artist's independence as egocentric squeamishness. Or else, the punch-line

of the novel may be read as an illustration of Roth's admission, in *Patrimony*, that "more than once," after he refused to "allow convention to determine [his] conduct," he would learn that his "bedrock feelings were sometimes more conventional than [his] sense of unswerving moral imperative" (*P*, 105).

Smilesburger's appeal for the suppression of the Athens chapter contrasts with the request of the liberal ironist Shuki Elchanan of *The Counterlife* that Nathan Zuckerman should not publicize his portrait of Mordecai Lippman for fear of repelling Jewish American donors.[14] Elchanan himself is a harsh left-wing critic of the order of things in Israel, often carried away by the wit of his own paradoxes, yet he is deeply engaged with his country's struggles. Like a large part of left-wing Israeli intellectuals (and unlike the less numerous present-day Israeli supporters of Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions), he feels that criticism of Israeli politics and institutions is his duty but that, coming from foreigners, it easily turns into facile reductive defamation – like that of a BBC interviewer who, reportedly, says to Shuki, that Auschwitz taught the Jews how "to be Nazis to the Arabs." Shuki's comment to Zuckerman – "I am not known around here as this country's leading P.R. man, but if I'd had a gun I would have shot him" (*CL*, 70) – is a figurative expression of his probably having been shocked into speechlessness. And yet Shuki does act almost like a PR (public relations) man in trying to censor Zuckerman's account of Agor (which we read well before Shuki's letter). Nathan does not even consider acceding to his friend's request.

Zuckerman will not engage in PR for Israel; nor does the "Roth" of *Operation Shylock*,[15] yet other avatars of Philip Roth revolt against defamations of Israel. In *Deception* the American writer wonders why in the literary circles in England everybody seems to hate Israel: "I never hear about Northern Ireland when I am out on the town here. I hear only about Nazi Israel and Fascist America" (*D*, 86). His English interlocutor thinks (mistakenly, as the future would show) that this is not anti-Semitism but "just the fashionable left" style (85); by contrast, during one conversation of this kind in *The Counterlife*, Nathan Zuckerman's wife Maria champions Israel with an unexpected fervor (as of a recovering anti-Semite). The protagonist of *Deception* is aware of the costs of the Jewish choice of living in Israel (where each generation has its wars and its fallen); he is outraged at his British interlocutors' anti-Israel vocabulary. Here the complexities of Zuckerman's American patriotism in *The Counterlife* may be illuminating: Zuckerman is "a little idealistic about America" but will not admit this "back in New York" (*CL*, 58). Nor will Roth and his fictional extension

admit a touch of idealism about Israel; moreover, in *Operation Shylock* "Roth" is presented as censoring out his Athens chapter in order to avoid depriving his one service to Israel of its value.

At the end of *The Prague Orgy*, a Czech political-police plainclothesman who oversees the protagonist's expulsion, identifies him (with the "smile of power being benign") as "Zuckerman the Zionist agent" (*PO*, 85–86). The context of *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock* turn this tragi-comedy-of-errors finale into a knot of ironies. It is not on a Zionist mission that Zuckerman has traveled to Czechoslovakia. Philip Roth himself had been active in attempts to help that country's writers persecuted by the communist regime after the suppression of the Prague Spring – more wholeheartedly active than the fictional "Roth" is in his service to Israel in *Operation Shylock*. If, however, one adapts Zuckerman's words about his grandparents in *Counterlife*, "insomuch as Zionism meant taking upon oneself, rather than leaving to others, responsibility for one's survival as a Jew" (*CL*, 57), the Prague adventure to recover the manuscripts of a Jewish writer is, indeed, his brand of Zionism.

Notes

1 Roth, *The Counterlife* (London: Penguin, 1988), 259. Further abbreviated as *C*.
2 Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), 14. Further abbreviated as *PC*.
3 Philip Roth, *The Prague Orgy* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 62. Further abbreviated as *PO*.
4 Roth, *Deception* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 41. Further abbreviated as *D*.
5 Roth had written a play based on another Gulag memoir, that of Eugenia Ginzburg, who was supposed to be played by Claire Bloom; see Claudia Roth Pierpont, *Roth Unbound: A Writer and His Books* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 142.
6 Alan Segal, "Portnoy's Complaint and the Sociology of Literature," *The British Journal of Sociology* 22.3 (1971), 266.
7 Following Judith Shklar's *Ordinary Vices*, Rorty defines a *liberal* as a person who believes that "cruelty is the worst thing we do" (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), xv. Liberal *ironists* are people who "combine commitment with a sense of the contingency of their own commitment" (ibid., 61); that is, maintain their ideology while recognizing it as a feature of their ethnic, religious, or class affiliations, their schools, their book-clubs, or their individual experience – rather than as a matter of absolute truth.

8 On the significance of Roth's friendship with Appelfeld, see chapter 5 of David Hadar, *Affiliation and Identity in Jewish American Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), 105–125.
9 Roth, *Patrimony: A True Story* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 208. Further abbreviated as *P*.
10 The impostor's agenda is a near-prophetic reflection of the growing trend of viewing Zionism as a *pharmakon*, a medicine turned poison; see Bruno Chaouat, *Is Theory Good for the Jews? French Thought and the Challenge of New Antisemitism* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), 164–168.
11 Debra Shostak, "Philip Roth's Fictions of Self-Exposure," *Shofar* 19.2 (2000), 31.
12 As in Shakespeare's play, the motif of the courthouse is prominent in the novel, only those on trial are not Jews but their persecutors, a former Nazi-camp guard and a stone-throwing Palestinian teenager. The novel's recurrent theme of mistaken identities may apply to those two defendants as well (it was later practically proved that Demjanjuk was not Ivan the Terrible, though he too may have done his part of harm).
13 Roth, *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 398.
14 Shuki's worry that the American audience would identify Lippman with Israel is reminiscent of the regrets of Riah in Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*: people tend to extrapolate the image of an individual bad Jewish person to the whole of the Jewish people. This submerged allusion points to the painful literary problem of balance, since the character of Riah was Dickens's not quite convincing way of compensating for Fagin of *Oliver Twist*.
15 On the issue of PR, see Emily Miller Budick, "Roth and Israel," in *The Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth*, ed. Timothy Parrish (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 70–72.