Multiple Versions of Jewishness: An Analysis of Philip Roth's *The Counterlife*

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The paper focuses on the key issues of Zionism and Jewish identity in Philip Roth's The Counterlife. These vital concerns have been addressed in a substantive way by the novelist and, therefore, merit close attention. At the core of the text can be found proliferating inventions of Jewishness. It creates for its characters a kaleidoscope of possible relations to Jewishness, covering a wide spectrum between assimilation and full identification with Jewish religion and nationalism. The Counterlife,thus, offers a plethora of definitions of Jewishness and also considers a wide range of possible models for being a Jew. It not only reveals how Jewish characters invent one another but it also takes into account how Gentiles fantasize Jews. Interpretation and imagined identities, therefore, emerge in the text as powerful and privileged issues.

Israel has played a remarkably minor role in American Jewish fiction. Not much imaginative writing has addressed the topic in a substantive way. This is surprising, considering the vital importance of Israel for American Jewish identity and the communal self-expression. Leslie Field expresses surprise that "American Jewish writers, when they have taken Jewish themes seriously, have treated the Holocaust and Israel as peripheral elements in their writings, even though, paradoxically these two subjects seem to be central to Jews everywhere today."[1] Similarly Alvin Rosenfeld points out that "within the context of American literature the Holocaust and Israel have not emerged into prominence and in most cases play a peripheral role." In such a scenario, I would like to show how Philip Roth's *The Counterlife* is an arresting exception. Of course, Saul Bellow has focused on Zionism in his non-fictional book *To Jerusalem and Back,* where he displays a sense of awe and mystery as he becomes immersed in the ancient city. In fact, even when he returns home to Chicago he "cannot evict Jerusalem from his thoughts." Meyer Levin has also been viewed as an American writer who shows a great involvement with Israel. He evokes the Israeli immigrant drama in his novels *The Settlers* and *The Harvest*. It has to be acknowledged that Hugh Nissenson is also exceptional among the contemporary writers as far as his serious involvement with Zionism in his stories goes. Still, as Leslie Field points out, "Major American Jewish writers seem to feel that Israel is not their milieu and would prefer to leave it to Israeli writers"[2] It is, therefore, interesting to see how Philip Roth engages with the issue of Zionism in *The Counterlife*[3] in a unique, idiosyncratic way.

The Counterlife features Americans who have made *aliyah* to join Israeli society. Through a series of conversations held in Israel, and through letters exchanged between the Zuckerman brothers and an Israeli named Shuki, Roth brings out these characters' interpretations of themselves and of one another. Each, in effect, invents the other. At the heart of the novel, then,

are proliferating inventions of Jewishness. As Robert Alter noted in an early review of the book, "After genocide and statehood and the fullest invitation to assimilation of any diaspora in history," it is not easy to imagine what a Jew might be. The novel is constructed as a series of conflicting imaginations of the Jewish self in which "no single viewpoint is allowed to cancel out the others."[4]

The Counterlife imagined by Roth is a sojourn with Gush Emunim. In the story an affluent dentist from suburban New Jersey arrives in Judea to embrace a life of religious nationalism, disciplined adherence to collective ideals and a return to Jewish consciousness. Following in horrified pursuit and hoping to dissuade him from that path is his brother Nathan Zuckerman (the writer/protagonist of Roth's earlier Zuckerman trilogy). *The Counterlife* sets up an opposition between a flawed U.S. and a redemptive Israel, which is strange considering Roth's own liberal sensibilities and secularism. Nonetheless, there is a focus on characters disillusioned with America, whose flight to Israel signals an impatience with self-centered values, exaggerated individualism, assimilation, sexual indulgence and the failure of political liberalism in America. In addition, the members of the Judean settlement and the yeshiva come off in a surprisingly positive light. The protagonist engages in lengthy, acrimonious debates with the ideologues of ultra-conservatism but the novel is not glibly dismissive of the alleged fanatics. At times those figures are even endowed with frankly admirable qualities: selflessness, a sense of purpose, devotion to community, humane warmth and kindness. There seems to be recognition of the power and resourcefulness of these characters even though there is a professed sympathy for opposing points of view.

The Counterlife concerns itself with definitions of Jewishness and considers a wide range of possible models for being a Jew. There is a debate between those who champion secular pleasures of the diaspora and others who uphold supernationalist ideals in Israel. The Zionists assert the view that diaspora Jews live an abnormal life of psychic division. Nathan Zuckerman provides a salient example, for he is marked by contradictions. Obsessed with trying to define Jewishness, he marries a gentile woman and pretends not to care about fundamental practises of Judaism. He defends America as a triumph of Jewish identity:

I was the American-born grandson of simple Galician tradesmen who, at the end of the last century, had on their own reached the same prophetic conclusion as Theodor Herzl that there was no future for them in Christian Europe, that they couldn't go on being themselves there without inciting to violence ominous forces against which they hadn't the slightest means of defense. 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. (*Counterlife* 53)

In this view, it is America where Jews can enjoy a secure existence, equal rights and freedom from harm. Echoing this sentiment, Shuki the sabra agrees that Israel is the more abnormal place. Speaking to Nathan about his compatriots, he says: "We are the excitable, ghettoized, jittery little Jews of the Diaspora, and you are the Jew with all the confidence and cultivation that comes of feeling at home where you are" (74).

Henry adopts a position staunchly opposed to such views. Renaming himself Hanoch, he is intent on finding his Jewish roots. He feels that he must defend the Jewish people and that his move to Agor springs from convictions inspired by the heroism of a glorious ancient past. Henry maintains that for the sake of these values he has overcome a profound selfishness. In America he was willing to risk death from a heart operation, largely because he didn't want to jeopardize an illicit liaison. Now all that past life seems trivial. Nathan argues, on the other hand, that his brother's actions amount to an escape from humdrum propriety. He believes that Henry has indulged himself in a fantasy that allows him to leave his wife and children callously behind. According to this view, the mild-mannered dentist has not acquired courage. He has simply become irresponsible due to an infatuation with military might.

Each of these arguments gives rise to others. Members of the Gush, for example, charge that it is America that is enchanted with violence, not Israel. They insist that the use of arms in Israel is an unfortunate and necessary means to face real dangers. It is a fact of life motivated not by bloodthirstiness but by the demands of self-defense. Nathan, in turn, tries to undermine this argument by interpreting his brother's loyalty to Lippman, in terms of subjugation to a charismatic father figure. He believes that Lippman manipulates Henry, just as their own father once did by harping on pogroms and Jewish vulnerability. In his view, these issues have little validity in the contemporary American social context. Henry responds by accusing his brother of not having a frame of reference larger "than the kitchen table in Newark" (155) where the two grew up. He feels that Nathan reduces every issue to private neurosis.

The debate between the brothers encompasses religion, too. Whereas Henry believes that Nathan's life is not genuinely Jewish, Nathan feels that Henry's new piety is counterfeit, a kind of playacting at Jewish devotion. There is a standoff as each of them charges the other with inauthenticity.

The novel explores other versions of Jewishness as well. For example, it takes into account that not only do Jews invent themselves and one another, but Gentiles also fantasize Jews. This fact places the beliefs of the characters in a more complicated and dangerous context. Nathan comments that Hitler imagined the Jew with contempt similar to what Lippman feels for his Diaspora brethren. Both see in the Jew a repulsive abnormality and both disparage "every introspective Jew of pacific inclinations and humanistic ideals as either a coward or a traitor or an idiot" (145). Shuki warns Nathan against a fascination with Jewish self-exaggeration and excess. He asks his friend not to include too vivid a portrait of Lippman in his next novel as it would only fuel anti-Semitic inclinations amongst Nathan's readers and would aggravate an eagerness to brand Israel as "Chauvinist, militant, aggressive and power-mad" (181).

The Counterlife goes on to create for its characters a kaleidoscope of possible relations to Jewishness. The Judea episode is only a single segment of a novel that provides alternative imaginings of Henry's and Nathan's lives. In one version, Henry undergoes the heart operation and dies. In another, it is Nathan who has the cardiac problem. He survives and marries a *shiksa* but when he moves to England, he becomes disenchanted with Christendom and so turns back to his Jewish origins. Part of the narrative is presented as Nathan's own fiction. Another part is

put forward as his wife's version of events as told to a psychiatrist. Yet another part is Henry's reaction to Nathan's words. Each character creates the other by telling the tale differently.

Nathan, the American, represents one pole of a spectrum between assimilation and total identification with Jewish religion and nationalism. Lippman in Israel represents the other pole and Shuki appears as a moderate on the Israeli scene. While retaining patriotic convictions, he criticizes his country frequently. Absent from the picture is an American who might appreciate the strengths of Israel even while opting to remain in America. Nathan does not fill this role, for his sympathies with Israel tend toward the frivolous. In this novel, by and large, discontent from the Israeli side is met by self-congratulation from the American side. It seems that nowhere is a voice given to an American who tries to build a meaningfully Jewish life in the Diaspora. Roth's concern with comedy and fabrication deflects attention from the theme of Zionism.

In this context, Lippman is granted positive attributes. Nathan acknowledges Lippman's finer qualities quite openly. The Gush leader fills his followers with pride. His wife's "eyes shine with life for a life free of Jewish cringing, diplomacy, apprehension, alienation" (134). Yet Lippman is too extreme a figure to represent a seriously competing perspective. Lippman insists on absolutes and ultimatums. He justifies a highly simplified approach to the complexities of the Arab/Israeli conflict and assumes that Jewish might makes right. With this kind of attitude, Lippman obviously cannot offer Nathan a perspective that can hold his attention for long.

Cynthia Ozick observes that the "characters in Philip Roth's *The Counterlife* are so wilily infiltrated by postmodernist inconstancy that they keep revising their speeches and their fates."[5] In the middle section of the novel "Aloft," Nathan ponders the issue of imagining most directly. Here he makes his key observation: "the treacherous imagination is every body's maker; we are all the invention of each other, everybody a conjuration conjuring up everyone else. We are all each other's authors" (164).

Significantly, there is a turn at this point to epistolary fiction.[6] Nathan spends his time on the plane, after leaving Agor, composing and re-reading letters. He gets the time to collect his thoughts and state his opinions about all that has happened. By emphasizing his letter writing, the text calls special attention to his act of concocting others. It is here that he makes a key observation: "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" (164). It is obvious here how long-distance correspondence makes possible one-sided relationships. There is no give-and-take of interaction as the letters are unsent and unanswered. Nathan, re-reading his letter to Henry, even remarks that the letter is directed more to himself than to Henry:

Hadn't I written this for myself anyway, for my own elucidation, trying to make interesting what we would not? I felt, looking back over the forty-eight hours, that alone with Henry I'd been in the presence of someone shallowly dreaming a very deep dream. I'd tried repeatedly while I was with him to invest this escape he's made from life's narrow boundaries with some

heightened meaning, but in the end he seemed to me … just as naïve and uninteresting as he'd always been. (177)

In this segment of the novel, a manic American youngster, Tommy, appears. He is a zany figure who embraces the most assimilationist of values after experimenting with the least assimilationist ones. His new philosophy bears the motto "forget remembering," a phrase that encapsulates the theory that Jewish suffering can be eradicated only when the world ignores Jewish history. It implies that when Gentiles are no longer asked to accept responsibility for anti-Semitism, then non-Jews will cease persecuting the Jews. To publicize his credo, Jimmy appears on the El Al flight with plans to hijack the plane and demand a hearing for his message.

Jimmy's wild self-inventions are not dismissed as foolishness in the novel. The security agents arrest him the moment he pulls out a hand grenade. Nathan, who has been sitting next to this character, is also taken into custody, and the two of them are stripped down to the skin and interrogated. Though Jimmy insists that he is a harmless prankster and Zuckerman protests that he is innocent, neither has proof of what he claims. Until the plane lands they remain stripped of a recognized identity. They are at the mercy of others who perceive them quite differently from the way they perceive themselves. At stake are matters of life and death but, even in such a situation, interpretation and imagined identities emerge again as powerful and privileged issues.

Roth's multiple inventions of the Jew also lead to slapstick. There is incongruity in a person like Nathan Zuckerman being set down in a biblical landscape. It can also be seen in the split persona of Henry/Hanoch. Moreover, there is a kind of zaniness in Jimmy the baseball enthusiast as he goes out for a catch at the Western Wall. The middle section of the novel begins with a rush of Orthodox Jews praying feverishly in the El Al plane and Roth gets considerable mileage out of this incongruous scene. Yet Roth equates their timeless prayers with the jet's speed, and his comic technique transforms the realistic into the almost surrealistic: "I could see the terrific dip at which they were praying. They looked like their objective was to pray at supersonic speed" (159). He ends this paragraph by comparing the spectacle to passengers making love: the "I" turns voyeur in an orgy outside of Prague and his own tradition.

Not only do these praying Jews appear strange to the narrator but the passengers on either side of Zuckerman also highlight his plight. After an ordinary American Jew like himself pesters him about the Diaspora, Zuckerman moves a few rows back where he finds himself seated near a thickly bearded young man reading a Hebrew prayer book and eating a candy bar. Once again the juxtaposition of Jewish tradition and popular American taste creates a certain dissonance: "His doing both struck me as strange, but then an unsympathetic secular mind is hardly a fit arbiter of what distinguishes piety from irreverence" (161-162).

Nathan writes to his brother Henry and in the process he also revises and reinvents a written dialogue between his "anti-self carrying…old identity papers"(169) and his "anti-Henry" (167) unearthed in the Judean hills. Zuckerman's lofty letter displaces Zionism, the purpose of which was "to reverse the very form of Jewish existence. The construction of a counterlife that is

one's own anti-myth was at its core. It was a species of fabulous utopianism, a manifesto for human transformation…A Jew could be a new person if he wanted to" (167). Roth reverses and displaces the relationship between Israel and the diaspora, even in the person of the passenger with the "archetypal Jewish cast of an Israeli face who reminds him of somebody back in America who could have been a close relative if not the very same Jew in a new incarnation" (168).

No doubt, Roth presents varieties of Jewishness in the novel, but his penchant for caricature and farce comes in the way of a serious debate about Zionism. *The Counterlife* does not constitute a fictional counterpart, for example, to Hillel Halkin's *Letters to an American Jewish Friend*.[7] Roth's concern with comedy and fabrication tends to shift the primary energy of the novel away from Israel. There is a return to the preoccupations of Roth's earlier works viz., Jewish/Gentile relations in the Diaspora and the power of the individual imagination. There is a proliferation of views regarding the old quandary of who is a Jew. Zuckerman's American life and his persona of an assimilated writer, who rebels against the foibles of his immigrant parents' generation, are obviously not sufficient anymore. Even though his ideas are shaken and undermined, they are not entirely displaced. While drawing attention to Zionism, *The Counterlife* manages to skirt a fuller engagement with this theme.

NOTES

1. Leslie Field, "Israel revisited in American-Jewish Literature" *Midstream* (Vol. XXVII, No. 9, Nov. 1992).
2. Leslie Field, "Surviving History: Updated Notes on the American-Jewish Dream" *Jewish Spectator*. (Vol. 53, No. 2, summer 1988).
3. Philip Roth *The Counterlife* (New York: Penguin, 1986). Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
4. Robert Alter, *Commentary* (Vol. 84, No. 1, July 1987).
5. Cynthia Ozick, *Metaphor and Memory* (New York: Knopf, 1986), p. 61.
6. Hillel Halkin, *Letters to an American Jewish Friend* (New York: Random, 1979).
7. See Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1982).