

THE TELLER & THE TALE:  
IMAGES OF ISRAEL IN  
THE COUNTERLIFE

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D. H. Lawrence once remarked that the reader should trust the tale rather than the teller. In Philip Roth's The Counterlife, however, one must decide who the teller is in order to determine what the tale is. On one level, the novel is an extended essay on the relationship between life and fiction, and the relationship of truth to fiction. On another level, the book is a novelistic working out of the problem of the modern Jew. In order to say anything at all meaningful about this brilliantly wonderful book, one must first decide what the book is about. Only after one has puzzled out the narrative structure of the book can one address its thematic elements.

The book comprises five sections: "Basel", "Judea", "Aloft", "Gloucestershire", and "Christendom". These five sections cannot, on the face of it, all have happened, for the narrations are mutually exclusive. Henry, who dies in "Basel", is suddenly very much alive in "Judea", eight months after the surgery which claimed his life in the first section. In "Gloucestershire" it is Nathan who has the surgery and dies. And in "Christendom", the "Aloft" section cannot have taken place, for it opens with reference to the quiet flight up from Tel Aviv; nor can the "Gloucestershire" be assumed to have taken place. Alternatively, one can take "Gloucestershire" as the truth, and the other four sections as the fictions. There are enough references in each of these sections about the creative process and the relationship between truth and fiction to suggest that careful reading of the novel is required in order to determine which events are meant to be seen as "truths" and which are to be seen as "fictions". How we evaluate the various characters, as either "real" or products of the imagination, will shape how much we can read into their remarks. There are many lines and incidents which are repeated in the novel, and it is not always clear to which we should give the greater valence.

In this regard, it is useful to consider a scene from the house of mourning in the Basel section. At one point, several of the relatives are talking about Israel; indeed, this is the first time in the novel that Israel is mentioned:

Shimmy and Grossman were discussing Israel's foreign policy. "Bomb 'em," Shimmy said flatly, "bomb the Arab bastards till they cry uncle. They want to pull out beards again? We'll die instead!"

Essie, cunning, shrewd, self-aware, another sort of survivor entirely, said to him, "You know why I give to Israel?"

Shimmy was indignant. "You? You never parted with a dime in your life."

"You know why?" she asked, turning to Grossman, a far better straight man.

"Why?" Grossman said.

"Because in Israel you hear the best anti-Semitic jokes. You hear even better anti-Semitic jokes in Tel Aviv than on Collins Avenue." (pp.38-9)

For Essie, Israel is even better than Florida. There is a fine line here between being able to laugh at one's self, self-deprecating humor, and self-hating humor. On one hand we know that Essie is trying to be funny, she must turn to Grossman for a straight man since Shimmy, taking her literally, is unable to play along, unable to get beyond the notion that Essie is too cheap to engage in charity. She proceeds to illustrate her point:

"I was there three years ago with Metz," Essie was saying. "We're driving from the airport to the hotel. The taxi driver, an Israeli, turns to us, and in English he says, 'Why do Jews have big noses?' 'Why?' I ask him. 'Because the air is free,' he says. On the spot I wrote a check for a thousand dollars to the UJA.

"Come on," Shimmy told her, "who ever pried a nickel out of you?" (p.39)

The joke itself is weak, one that I remember from my childhood. It prompts Essie to make a sizable donation to UJA, to hear her tell it, and we are entitled to ask why. In contrast to Shimmy, who sees Israel as the saviors of the Jews, the place where Jews can stand tall, vicariously identifying with Israel as bully, Essie identifies with Israel because its bad jokes poke fun at the Jews. In America, the Jew is a shlemiel, a victim perhaps, but in Israel, the Jew can laugh at himself; it is that strength of character which allows her to pay money. One might say that the difference between Israel and America for Essie is that in America the Jew must laugh at himself, whereas in Israel the Jew can laugh at himself. This is what makes the anti-Semitic jokes better.

Of course, it is easy to build a scene like this up, perhaps out of proportion to its importance in the novel. After all, it is just a few old-timers kibitzing in a house of mourning, a house of mourning which, in terms of the book, may or may not actually exist. What draws attention to this story is that the same lines appear in an entirely different context. In the Judea section, Nathan meets up with his old friend Shuki, who served as his entree into Israeli society during his first visit eighteen years before. Shuki is relating to Nathan his own experiences from time spent in England, where he was taken in to some extent by the civility of

Oxford society:

"My problem began when I got back. My wife's family would meet at our house on Friday nights to argue about politics, and I couldn't get a word in. During six months at Oxford I had learned civility and the rules of civilized discourse, and this turned out to be absolutely crippling in an Israeli discussion."

"Well," I said, "that hasn't changed--you still hear the best anti-Semitic cracks in a Dizengoff Street café."

"The only reason left to live here," Shuki said. (pp.64-5)

Israel, even for Israelis, is an extreme society. It functions with its own set of rules which, at least in Israel, must be adhered to; it is a matter of survival. But it is an extremism which produces a very pointed sense of humor, a way of laughing at one's self. For Nathan the satirist, it provides a way to laugh at others, in this case Israelis, even friends. But for Shuki, this humor provides a certain *raison d'être*. Shuki, in his way, remains in Israel because the humor is so good; in order to laugh at one's self best, one remains in Israel, which is a Jewish country, only more so.

In Israel Shuki functions like Essie functions in America. The role of the Jew in America is to give money to Israel; the role of the Jew in Israel is to remain. Both identify Israel with the best anti-Semitic jokes; both commit themselves to Israel in their own way. Nathan has no such commitment. He has come to Israel, for the first time in nearly twenty years, on a personal mission, to see his brother. He has no identification with Israel. It is instructive to consider that nowhere in Israel does Nathan feel entirely comfortable, entirely at home. Nathan remains an outsider to the end; it is no accident that the last chapter is entitled "Christendom", for it is <sup>with</sup> in the Diaspora that he casts his lot. And it is no accident that he chooses to identify with the Jews by circumcizing his son, a physical sign, because his Judaism has no content, religious or otherwise.

In terms of the structure of the novel, it is useful to consider the titles of the five sections. While they are all descriptions of place (at the very least "Aloft" is a description of where Nathan is at, and Christendom is a geographical place and not just a state of mind or being), they are not all places where the main character gets, they are not all realized quests. It is, of course, no accident, that Henry's Maria is from Basel, the site of the First Zionist Congress, what may be described as the birthplace of the nationalist Zionist movement. But Henry is drawn to Basel

not for its Zionist or Jewish associations but in pursuit of a Swiss-German non-Jewish woman with whom he is engaged in an adulterous affair. Basel is a quest, a place for fulfillment, provided Henry is willing to tear himself away from his past, namely his wife and children. It is a kind of Promised Land, though stripped of the very Jewish associations it does have, and in fact Henry gets no closer to it than a phone call; he dies in exile. Similarly, Gloucestershire, the home of Nathan's Maria, is a place to which he never gets. These two places, the birthplace of the non-Jewish lover whom one cannot have at all, or has at best vicariously, in the case of Nathan, or cannot have permanently, in the case of Henry, represent the mythos of death in exile. And in terms of the book it is precisely myth, for one can argue, convincingly I think, that these two sections are not the story per se, but a spinning out by the writer of what might have happened, variations on a theme. These titles, then, represent the failed or unrealized quest, the sense of exile which is the burden of unfulfilled love.

"Basel" and "Gloucestershire" sandwich "Judea" and "Aloft", which are, at one level two sides of one story. In these stories, no one dies. The title represents the locus of the action, the place of the main character. In this sense, "Judea" is Henry's story, "Aloft" Nathan's. Judea is in the Promised Land, and yet outside it, on the fringes. Henry, of course, believes Judea is more real than the State of Israel. He describes it as the place:

where the Jews began, not in Tel Aviv but here. If anything is territorialism, if anything is colonialism, it's Tel Aviv, it's Haifa. This is Judaism, this is Zionism, right here where we are eating our lunch! (p.109)

The claim of Judea is the claim of beginnings. It harkens back to the early national experience of the people. Indeed, when Henry tells Nathan he prays every night, he tells him he says the Shema, a Biblical prayer, from the earliest national document, but does not yet put on tefillin, emblematic of rabbinic Judaism, of religion. At the same time, Judea is curiously an American place. The people here, (Lippman, an immigrant from Nazi Germany is a notable exception) are primarily Americans. Or they are Arab. Prominently missing are any Israelis. The settlers have cut themselves off from Israeli experience. Judea is an aberration, both within and without. From the inside, as Henry suggests, it is the real Promised Land as opposed to the rest of Israel; from the outside, it is a place of exile, yet so close to the Promised Land. In fact, there is nothing particularly Jewish about

Judea. As Nathan writes Henry:

there's one dichotomy missing about which you said little, or nothing: Hebrew/English. Out at Agor anti-Semitism comes up, but nothing that I heard all night from you or your friends about the Hebrew aspect and the large, overwhelming cultural reality of that. (p.148)

Judea becomes a place for Jews with little Judaism, if any, a place for extreme nationalism. Henry, that quintessentially American Jew, has found his place in Israel outside of it.

Somewhat similarly, Nathan too finds his place in Israel outside of it, in a plane leaving for Christendom. For, it is only on the plane that Nathan can begin to put his thoughts in order and come to some understanding of his brother. More, perhaps, he comes to some understanding of himself and his views on Israel. After making a number of points about Henry and Israel/Zionism, Nathan admits:

To tell you the truth, had I run into you on a Tel Aviv street with a girl on your arm, and you told me, "I love the sun and smell and the falafel and the Hebrew language and living as a dentist in the middle of a Hebrew world," I wouldn't have felt like challenging you in any way. All that--which corresponds to my ideas of normalcy--I could have understood far more easily than your trying to lock yourself into a piece of history that you're simply not locked into, into an idea and a commitment that may have been cogent for the people who came up with it, who built a country when they had no hope, no future, and everything was only difficulty for them--an idea that was, without a doubt, brilliant, ingenious, courageous, and vigorous in its historical time--but that doesn't really look to me to be so very cogent to you. (p.149)

More to the point, Henry's form of Zionism is not cogent to Nathan, who can identify either with the cultural form of Zionism described above or the Zionism of one whose "decision to go to Israel arose out of the strong sense that he was escaping dangerous or disabling anti-Semitism." (p.146) But what Nathan cannot understand is how someone else might identify with Israel and Zionism. When it comes to Israel Nathan has a real failure of imagination, for he cannot get beyond his own limited view of what Zionism and Israel should be, a view held by one who has no interest in moving to Israel.

The person who poses the sharpest questions to Nathan about the meaning of Israel is

Shuki, who reminds Nathan that the issues are deadly serious, and not just wondrous comical. People, including Shuki's brother, do get killed. Nathan is unable to answer Shuki completely; he does not finish the letter and is instead drawn into the hijacking caper by his self-acclaimed disciple Jimmy. This is perhaps proof for Shuki's argument that there is a serious side which transcends comical exaggeration. The end of the chapter is recognition of this, for Nathan is unable to escape Israel in this chapter; the plane heads back. Significantly, though, it does not actually land, for Nathan does not quite belong in Israel.

The book ends in Christendom, which is both a physical place and a state of mind. It is here that Nathan decides to have his son circumcised, for what he finally decides is that there must be some kind of identification as a Jew. While he did not think so earlier, when discussing it with Shuki, he now believes in the value of circumcision:

Circumcision confirms that there is an us, and an us that isn't solely him and me. England's made a Jew of me in only eight weeks, which, on reflection, might be the least painful method. 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. (p.324)

At the end, it seems that Nathan affirms a national Jewish identity outside the Jewish nation. For despite the circumcision, the son is not a Jew in the religious sense. Nathan is an unabashed believer in the Diaspora, and most certainly a Diaspora rather than Exile. For it is in the Diaspora that he finds his own Jewish identity, and discovers the need to transmit something, something Jewish to his progeny. It is significant that the means of transmission he chooses is the circumcision, which he sees as a physical mark, rather than a religious ceremony. Interestingly, in today's world, the physical sign of circumcision is no longer a sign of the Jew alone; one wonders, then, how Nathan intends to endow the physical sign with content.

For Roth, one can argue, the Promised Land is Christendom. Here Nathan is able to deal with the issues for which the State of Israel is seen to be a solution, but not the only solution. Israel, for Nathan, and for Roth, is for people who embrace Hebrew culture. The Jew who can deal with anti-Semitism in the Diaspora, who is not overwhelmed by it, the Jew who can maintain a national identity in the Diaspora, and can transmit it, can find redemption in Christendom. Whether or not this is indeed

(7)

true, or is in fact another one of Nathan's fictions, remains to be seen.