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Reviews

Reviews

UNSETTLING QUESTIONS: PALESTINE, ISRAEL, THE HOLY LAND AND ZION

Axel Stähler

The Last Resistance

Jacqueline Rose

Verso, London and New York, 2007, hb
237pp ISBN 8 1846 7124 3 £16.99
www.versobooks.com

The Question of Zion

Jacqueline Rose

Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2005, hb
202pp ISBN 0 6911 1750 8 £24.95
www.press.princeton.edu

The People on the Street: A Writer's View of Israel

Linda Grant

Virago, London, 2006, pb
214pp ISBN 1 8440 8254 4 £9.99
www.virago.co.uk

The Holy Land in English Culture 1799–1917: Palestine and the Question of Orientalism

Eitan Bar-Yosef

Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2005, hb
319pp ISBN 0 1992 6116 4 £50
www.oup.co.uk

It is hardly surprising that Rose's refractory critique of Zionism in *The Question of Zion* has provoked fierce resistance. Indeed, in the light of her more recent collection of essays, *The Last Resistance*, it seems as if this, precisely, had been her objective. Resistance is not an 'innocent' term for Rose (5). In the latter book, she deliberately applies it in its double-edged meaning, as signifying defiance but also, in the Freudian sense, as referring to one of the mind's defences which allows the individual – or, as the case may be, the collective – to disengage from the anguish and turmoil of internal life. Exploring the conflictual space between the two in a mosaic of essays, Rose's main objective is to review critically the passage of the Jewish people from the wasteland of war-torn Europe to Palestine, for she perceives the history of Israel as 'providing a graphic illustration of how resistance can shift between its two poles' (5). Ranging in

The Last Resistance

Jacqueline Rose



their subject matter inter alia from Freud to his correspondence with Arnold Zweig during the latter's temporary 'exile' in Palestine, to Vladimir Jabotinsky, David Grossman and – on first sight perhaps less likely – to Walt Whitman, J M Coetzee and Simone de Beauvoir, Rose's essays reveal as their common denominator the desire to understand history by entering into the 'strangest pathways' of the mind – by exploring the potential of fiction as resistance to the 'last' resistance, which Freud described as originating 'from the sense of guilt or the need for punishment' (Freud 160).

In *The Last Resistance*, Rose argues that 'trauma enters the national psyche in the form of resistance to its own pain' (6). It is thus an elaboration on her earlier contention, in *The Question of Zion*, that the founding of the nation was really a 'colossal *sublimation* of historical pain' (130) and that fear, shame and humiliation entrenched inside the Jewish-Israeli political identity and life have warped the collective psyche. This, her insistence that one should 'talk about the suffering of the Jewish people and the violence of the Israeli state in the same breath' (xiv), is 'ideologically' probably the most contentious of Rose's pleas, not least because it leads her to assert that the Palestinians have become 'only symbolic substitutes' for 'something no longer spoken out loud, something quite else' (133) — the victims, no less than the Jewish people itself, of the repetition and denial of its horrific past.

Her collection of essays may thus be seen also as a response to her detractors whom, in all likelihood, she may regard as giving voice to this particular resistance. Indeed, both of her books are contributions to identifying and analysing this 'last' resistance with the ultimate aim of overcoming it so that a process of healing and, by extrapolation, of reconciliation may be set in motion. While it would seem that there certainly is a formidable resistance in evidence in the psyche of the Zionist collective, which would then need to be overcome to effect a 'therapy', this should not deflect from the problems inherent in *The Question of Zion*.

Rose dedicated her slim volume to the memory of Edward Said, and indeed, in some respects *The Question of Zion*, as its title suggests, may be understood as a companion piece to his earlier *The Question of Palestine* (1979). Manifestly, what Rose attempts to do is to understand the force 'of Israel's dominant vision of itself as a nation' (*Question of Zion* xi). Her own contribution to this debate she conceives of as 'neither history nor survey' (xiii) and it may well be that therein lies a tacit acknowledgement of the flaws of her book. Passionately, but not necessarily

entirely convincingly, argued (her study is polemic and occasionally perhaps too narrow in its outlook) the author's fervent and no doubt honourable endeavours to intervene in the Middle East conflict lead to what in effect appears to be a biased and in some ways reductive interpretation of the history of Zionism.

While Rose's psychoanalytical reading of Zionism, fascinating for its candour and commitment, seems persuasive enough to me, one of her basic assumptions, that Zionism is a messianic movement, the first after the disastrous seventeenth-century craze centred on Shabtai Zvi, does not — although she traces the argument back to Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt. That there was, and is, a messianic strain in Zionism seems hardly debatable. Rather, it is the exclusivity of Rose's claim and some of the conclusions she draws from it, especially the notion that therein lie the origins of the current dilemma, which seem reductive.

Secular Zionism as represented by Theodor Herzl or Max Nordau, though making frequent use of messianic diction, fervently rejected any associations with mysticism and, quite explicitly, messianism. Rose is well aware of this, she quotes Nordau to this effect, but then turns the tables on Zionist secularism by introducing a psychoanalytical reading:

But traces of messianic redemption, even in its acute form, can be found in the language of those who in many ways struggled hardest to defeat it. So much so that we can fairly ask whether the affinity between Zionism and messianism is too intimate and powerful to have ever been anything other than partially — and finally unsuccessfully — repressed. (33)

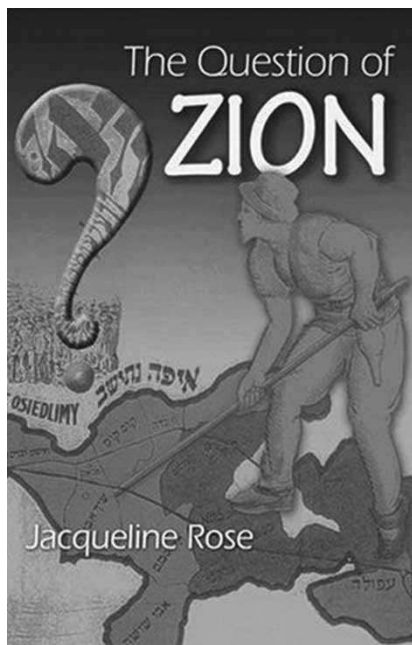
Indeed, even a cursory look, for instance, at the poetry published in the early Zionist press will confirm the ubiquitous use of messianic diction, but also the abhorrence of the 'clerisy' (Rafaels 15), and its suffusion with socialist imagery — and even a lot of

blood and soil — which in many instances converge with the messianic idiom and turn it into a trope. As a redemptive movement, rather perhaps than a messianic one, and like so many other 'redemptive' nationalist movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Jewish nationalist movement searched for historical precedents to explain and legitimise its political project. Messianism — in its historical manifestations, most notably the incessantly invoked Bar Kochba and the Maccabees — is itself very much a political idea, one which, like its language, was considered to be intrinsically Jewish and which thus provided Zionism with a perfect vehicle in which to couch its nationalist aspirations. The redemptive function ascribed to art by cultural Zionism equally shows the usefulness of the messianic idiom which was easily transferable but was so only, I would suggest, because it was detached from messianism as a religious belief.

Considering the sheer political and cultural expediency of the messianic idiom, Rose's psychological explanation of the messianic strain in Zionism, emphasising the feel-good factor of exilic Jewry finally seeing itself, contrary to all appearances, as 'a major force in history' (23) seems only partially convincing. Indeed, while the global political impact Zionism had, and continues to have, may seem to support Rose's claim that it 'is one of the most potent collective movements of the twentieth century, whose potency needs urgently to be understood' (14–15), for the period Rose is discussing here, the gestational period of pre-state Zionism, this appears to be very much a retrospective and distorting reading.

Similarly, it seems necessary to distinguish between the rhetoric of messianism utilised by early Zionism and the incisive change brought about by the Israeli victory in the Six Day War after which messianism, boosted by the new 'facts' on the ground, thrived. Rose acknowledges the significance of the year 1967 in this context, but argues that the obvious manifestations of the messianic

strain in more recent Zionist thought distract from ‘the more subtle currents of messianism in Israel’s prehistory and its national life’ (37). But it seems to me that where messianic beliefs have penetrated Zionist ideology beyond mere rhetoric pre-1967, it was rather orthodox messianism which appropriated the Zionist project, an appropriation facilitated precisely by the Zionist susceptibility to the messianic idiom.



Finally, as a critique of Zionism, Rose’s *The Question of Zion* no less than *The Last Resistance* seems to be the product of a certain ambivalence which deprives both books of their decisiveness. For Rose does not question the basic assumptions of Zionism. Rather, she indicates a point where, in her opinion, the majority of Zionists went astray, disregarding the dissenting voices copiously quoted by her — of Achad Ha’am, Martin Buber, Hermann Kohn, Hannah Arendt and others. In effect, Rose’s criticism aligns itself with this earlier dissenting strain, and much of the ideologically motivated resistance it met, stigmatising her work as ‘abominable’ (Leibler 16) and herself as a ‘biological anti-Semite’ (Rubinstein 2F), seems to mistake her stance. Problematical, in this light, is rather Rose’s deference to Said, for her vision

of a more enlightened Zionism surely runs counter to his expectations and, as Rose herself suggests, it is more than likely that Said ‘would not have agreed with all of it’ (*Question* xxii) — or any of it, because for Said the persistence of the Zionist claim to a sovereign Jewish entity in the region was at the very heart of the question, and the only answer he envisaged was its un-settling.

Accusing Rose of a ‘wavering Jewish identity’, Emanuele Ottolenghi took umbrage at her critical attitude because, as he claims, Zionism forms ‘the core of contemporary Jewish identity’ (196), a sentiment echoed by Isi Leibler, who insists that ‘Israel remains the principal anchor for Jewish identity for most Jews’ (16). The disconcerting inference is not only that there is a fixed Jewish identity but, more seriously, that this is determined by a particular political mindset shaped by what is virtually built up to be the ‘metropolitan centre’ of Jewishness which, finally, is above criticism. In his *Diaspora Blues: A View of Israel* (1987) the British-Jewish writer Clive Sinclair describes a situation after viewing Victor Schonfeld’s documentary about the depressing impact of the occupation upon both Israelis and Palestinians, *Viewpoint ’86: Courage Along the Divide* (1986), which seems to encapsulate the dilemma perfectly. Reiterating the irate response of a leading member of the Anglo-Jewish community to the film, Sinclair observes: ‘He seemed unable to comprehend that he was, by defending the morally indefensible, compromising what would otherwise be inalienable — the very existence of Israel’ (89). He notes the need to draw a line between ‘democratic and undemocratic Israel, the border between the ego and the id, beyond which every messianic desire is permitted, consequences notwithstanding’ (208), and resignedly remarks: ‘Only a few Jews seem prepared to consider what will happen otherwise’ (89). Rose, obviously, is one of the few, as is Sinclair himself and as is also the British-Jewish journalist and novelist Linda Grant.

Grant’s *The People on the Street: A Writer’s View of Israel* is a spirited attempt to grapple with the

contradictions of Jewish existence in Israel and the diaspora, and particularly those of the British Jew, ‘a category error’, as the author describes herself (5). Begun at a time when she felt stymied in writing her projected novel (apparently not her most recently published novel *The Clothes on Their Backs*) and stirred by an obviously existential need, she composed this personal account instead.

Some of Grant’s preoccupations and insights are reminiscent of her earlier prize-winning novel, *When I Lived in Modern Times* (2000), set in Mandate Palestine in the short but decisive period between the Second World War and the foundation of the State of Israel: the question of what makes a Jew, the insistence that suffering does not improve people, individually or collectively, and, perhaps most importantly, the concern with language, ‘stories’ and the power of narrative. Some of these issues had been addressed already by Sinclair, and although he does not emphasise his occupational stance in the subtitle of his *Diaspora Blues*, his endeavour is in many ways similar to Grant’s. His is a book that is strongly to be recommended as complementary reading to both Grant’s more recent view of Israel and Rose’s criticism of Zionism, although, sadly, it is currently out of print. Like Sinclair, Grant includes talks with critically minded Israeli writers, in some cases — Aharon Appelfeld and David Grossman — even the same writers; like him, she travels to and describes the ordeal at the checkpoints; and, again, perhaps most importantly, like him, she reflects on the significance of stories and, not least, the potency of imaginative empathy. All this is not intended to throw suspicion upon the originality of Grant’s view of Israel. Rather, it may serve to remind ourselves that in a world of change some things, perhaps shockingly, never change — or change only reluctantly, because there are so many levels of resistance.

Life in Israel, Grant claims, has a *davka*-esque quality — it is ‘in spite of’. To live in Israel, one has to live in a ‘bubble’. Grant describes the process



during which she herself, turning her back on reality, succumbs to the lure of the bubble, but ‘there were’, and how could it be any different, ‘always tears in the *bu’ah*’:

What entered it was refracted from Gaza and Ramallah and did not shed any light on what was happening there but on what was happening to Israel itself. It was a society floating on boiling anger, fear, anxiety, post-traumatic shock, aversion, brutality. You saw it in the road rage, in the domestic violence, in the rape, the desire to build walls against not just suicide bombers but your own neighbours. (177)

And, yes, here we may turn to Rose and her psychoanalytical approach, for here we see the last resistance balefully at work. Are Grant’s suspicions of the subterranean to be taken in any way as symbolic in this context? For once again, as in *When I Lived in Modern Times*, she articulates not only her fascination with Tel Aviv, the (formerly) White City of Bauhaus architecture and modernism, but also her emotional distance from, and even distrust of, Jerusalem:

Jerusalem sat, sits, on me like a lead helmet. Nothing about it

excited or interested me, including the wretched freezing winters, the awful restaurants, the feeling I had that if I didn’t watch my step I’d fall down a hole any minute into the fourth century BC, and however much I shouted no one would come and rescue me from that horrible crevasse. (64)

Subterranean Jerusalem, as well as its heavenly variety, were precisely what captivated the English cultural imagination during the long nineteenth century — much more than the real city which, like the ‘Holy Land’ itself, was turned into a metaphor for England as Eitan Bar-Yosef demonstrates in his extremely well researched and convincingly argued study of *The Holy Land in English Culture 1799–1917: Palestine and the Question of Orientalism*.

In his monograph, Bar-Yosef traces the dream of building Jerusalem in England’s green and pleasant land as well as the ways in which this vision influenced the encounter with the actual Jerusalem — from John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678/1684) to the British conquest of the city in 1917. As Bar-Yosef shows, vernacular biblical culture played a significant role in the construction of Englishness and, in interplay with vernacular Orientalism, it also informed the Victorian fascination with Palestine, since the ‘internalization of the twin biblical images — “Promised Land” and “Chosen People” — offered the English collectively and as individuals, a way of understanding their place in the world’ (29).

With the concept of vernacular Orientalism, defined as a cultural process through which an initially Oriental paradigm is internalised and turned into an integral part of (in this case) English identity formation and culture, Bar-Yosef challenges received notions of the dissemination and circulation of a secularised academic Orientalist discourse which, as he demonstrates quite convincingly, was largely unavailable to mass culture. Drawing on an impressive range of cultural forms that shaped and were shaped by vernacular biblical culture

and vernacular Orientalism, Bar-Yosef delineates the complex and multi-faceted interaction between metaphorical and literal appropriations of the ‘Holy Land’ across a sequence of cultural and social demarcations. He argues that the imperial vision of ‘England in Jerusalem’ was informed by the vernacular vision of building ‘Jerusalem in England’. But as he shows, it was the latter, the metaphorical appropriation of the ‘Holy Land’, in both domestic and imperial contexts, which eclipsed the former, the literal, geographical Holy Land itself, in the English cultural imagination.

‘Contemporary readers’, Grant observes critically, ‘make great, perhaps intolerable demands of literature; they require it more and more to bear witness, to conform to the work of journalists, to make a moral case’. She pleads instead that literature ‘should create ambiguity, doubt, discomfort, confusion’ (191). Rose, I think, would agree. She believes that to be a literary critic ‘is, amongst other things, to enter into the mind of the other, to invite and even force your reader to see themselves in situations far from their own’ (*Resistance* 193). Hence her interest in those ‘strangest pathways’ of the mind to be traced in fiction. Palestine, Israel, the Holy Land and Zion — these terms convey a number of diverging perceptions of a narrow strip of land and the disparate mental images we form of it, as far from each other as can be. All four books give essential insights into the sometimes deeply hidden formative processes of such images and their frequently injurious interplay with ‘reality’. Challenging established notions, they pose unsettling questions. Whether they are equal to un-settling the settlers is another question entirely.

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Sue Vice

Multiculturalism and the Jews

Sander Gilman

Routledge, Abingdon, 2006, pb
288pp ISBN 0 4159 7918 8 £15.99
www.routledge.com

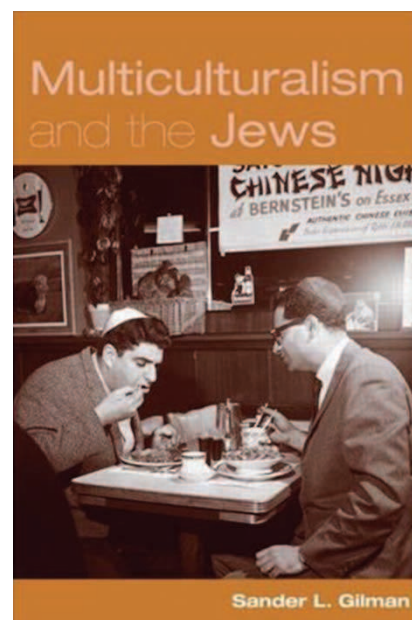
We owe a considerable debt to Sander Gilman for his work in this book on a crucial subject — that of the Jews' relation to contemporary debates about multiculturalism, and to an Islam which is often also implicitly referenced in such discussions. As Gilman notes, many of the contemporary novels he examines, by writers such as Hanif Kureishi, Zafer Senoçak and Achmat Dangor, emerge from an Islamic context. Their texts include characters who are Jewish, or apparently so, and who embody the unsettling experience of integration and interaction that is the 'multicultural experience' of the non-Jewish protagonist. Such embodiment arises from what Gilman calls the 'fantasy' of the Jews as a people who are always already multicultural. Gilman also examines novels by writers who represent multiculturalism the other way round, so to speak — by Jewish writers entering new worlds for the first time, particularly Russians in Germany, such as Wladimir Kaminer, but also Franz Kafka and Philip Roth by reason of their

shared interest in Jewish transformation, whether this is by becoming an insect or by having one's nose fixed.

In *Multiculturalism and the Jews* Gilman covers a vast terrain with gusto, exploring novels in which black South Africans masquerade as Jews, British Asians declare that 'we are not Jews', and Chinese-Americans embrace conversion to Judaism. That the roots of his book lie in a series of lectures is sometimes evident in his recourse to plot summaries and polemical flourishes. For instance, he skates over the more complex truth by claiming that Jews in early apartheid-era South Africa were classified as 'coloured' until they stopped signing their names in Hebrew characters; in fact, it was Yiddish and not Jews themselves who were thus described. More troublingly, the book appears to have been rushed into press without thorough proof-reading, as repetitions, scrambled sentences and typos (of Spielberg's name, for instance) testify. But the analyses Gilman presents are invariably fascinating, and his material is so various and multi-lingual that one can only conclude he is the perfect multicultural subject. Gilman's task is made harder by the difficulty of defining either Jews, whose status as the 'litmus test' for multicultural relations is complicated by their ambiguously ethnic and religious status — and multicultural logic tends to transform religion into ethnicity, rites into culture — or multiculturalism itself. Throughout, Gilman points to the latter's two rival meanings: either that of a melting-pot, in which complete integration takes place and difference vanishes, or a cultural pluralism in which separate spheres can co-exist.

The slipperiness of 'multiculturalism' seems sometimes to affect Gilman himself, who on the whole navigates skilfully between the two meanings but also seems to use the term in a common-or-garden way simply to mean 'mixed' or 'tending towards assimilation'. This is the case with halal Christmas turkeys, a big hit in Britain. They seem to be evidence of accommodation as much as of acculturation, although Gilman asks whether these turkeys are 'the ultimate

multicultural animal'. Indeed, such slippage is implicit in the two definitions Gilman cites. The melting-pot can also be described as a hybrid, but this makes it sound rather like a cultural pluralism in which two parts are joined but still distinct. The book's cover image of two kippot-wearing Jewish men eating Chinese food at the legendary Lower East Side Bernstein's-on-Essex neatly sums up this ambiguity. Is this a snapshot of a melting-pot in which even Jews partake of other cultures and their cuisines, or one of the Jewish appropriation of another culture for its own ends?



Gilman quotes approvingly from the dialogue in Kaminer's short story collection *Russian Disco*, in which a rabbi attempts to find out if a Russian immigrant to Berlin is Jewish by asking what the Jews eat at Easter. 'Pickles and Easter cake', is her reply. Gilman reads this contradictory combination as a possibly 'postmodern' Jewish resistance to being transformed from an ethnicity into a religion, but it sounds more like the kind of inevitable compromise represented by a halal — or kosher — turkey in the face of an overwhelming Christian culture. More pertinent perhaps is the old joke question, which one might reasonably put to the diners in Bernstein's deli, 'What do Jews do at