

JONAH UNBOUND

Howard Cooper

In memory of Philip Roth, 1933-2018

*“Sheer playfulness and deadly seriousness are my closest friends.”
(Philip Roth)¹*

*“Shutting his mouth, his eyes and his ears, he built for himself the illusion of not knowing,
hence not being an accomplice to the things taking place in front of his very door.”
(Primo Levi)²*

Prologue: Anonymity and Storytelling

We don't know who wrote the Book of Jonah. Like all the books of the Hebrew Bible – even the Book of Psalms, or those that seem to name their author in their opening lines, like Jeremiah or Ezekiel – they are anonymous works. Whether prose or poetry, or some combination of the two, these cherished texts are fictions – that is, composed literary artefacts – whose authors remain hidden from us in a similar way to the contemporary Italian novelist Elena Ferrante, who publishes her fictions and essays, and gives her written interviews, under that pseudonym, but – in a rare countercultural move – wishes to keep her own identity, and her own name, *out of sight*. The Biblical authors took the analogous view that their own identity, their own personhood, had no significance, no importance, in the larger scheme of things – the message was all, not the messenger.³

Elena Ferrante – whoever she is, and for many years there was even a question as to whether it was a 'she', as if that matters – once wrote that *“I believe that books, once they are written, have no need of their authors. If they have something to say, they will sooner or later find readers ... I very much love those mysterious volumes, both ancient and modern, that have no definite author but have had and continue to have an intense life of their own.”*⁴

And isn't that what we readers are after, what we are seeking – whether it is a Biblical text or a novel or a poem – texts that have “an intense life of their own”? For then that life – the life of the text, the life in the text – can touch our own life: can inspire, provoke, disturb, haunt, illuminate,

¹ Philip Roth, *Reading Myself and Others*, (New York: Farrer, Straux and Giroux), 1975, p.111.

² Primo Levi, Afterword to *If This Is A Man & The Truce*, (1963; Abacus publishers), 1987, p.396.

³ To complicate things, we can note that one of the co-authors of one Biblical book is identified by name – Baruch the scribe, Jeremiah's companion and amanuensis (see Jeremiah, chapter 35) – and becomes part of the story (as in the appearance of 'Philip Roth' in his own novels): a meta-fictional touch, *avant la lettre*.

⁴ Quoted in James Wood, "Women on the Verge: The Fiction of Elena Ferrante", *The New Yorker*, January 21st 2013.

enliven, our own lives. As Ferrante wrote on another occasion: “Those who are ... given the job of telling stories shouldn’t be concerned about the serenity of individual readers; rather, they should construct fictions that help seek the truth of the human condition.”⁵

So I’m going to tell you a story. ‘Jonah’s story’. A story that isn’t concerned about your serenity – not because I am a monster, but because if we are after, in Ferrante’s words, “the truth of the human condition” (and this is what the Book of Jonah is also intent on, in its own disguised way), then we will have to be exposed to states of mind far from serene: we will have to encounter fear and denial, anger and despair, vulnerability and disappointment, mixed in with moments of hopefulness and joy, glimpses of a larger understanding – and all of this in sustained tension with our daily experience of injustice, and the painful recognition that compassion alone may not be enough to save the world.

‘Jonah’s Story’

1. ‘A Time to Speak ...’

Nu, what took you so long? Now, when it’s nearly all over, you want to hear my voice? I’ve been waiting a long time: two millennia, more ... And not a day has passed since they wrote my story that I haven’t burned to set the record straight. Not an hour has gone by in the long nights of exile when I haven’t returned to those days, bitter at how they never allowed my voice to be heard again – after those damned cattle (4:11). What kind of an ending is that? Didn’t you ever wonder why I was left feeling so angry (4:3,8-9)? The way they told it, it was ‘mission accomplished’ – the Ninevites are warned, there’s instant repentance, the people are saved. Job done. Fade to sunset. But that’s a parody of transformation: pure Hollywood kitsch! You must have realised by now that’s not how it ended. Nineveh was already dust and ashes when they wrote the story. Do you really believe that God’s compassion is the end of the story? You *schlemiels*, that’s what they want you to think!

I knew that Disney version of reality was false – people don’t change overnight, that’s not how the world works, that’s not the truth of the human condition. Yes, “Better for me to die, than to live” (4:3) – to live colluding with that dishonesty. They told the story as if the fate of the most ruthless empire the Middle East had ever known was in the balance, and a few ritual acts of piety – changing their clothes and fasting and prayer (3:5-8) – could compensate for years of aggression and occupation and acts of injustice. Really? That’s all it takes? Talk about fake news! Those old storytellers knew a thing or two about how to edit a story to suit their own agendas. They stitched me up. They edited my voice⁶ and then condemned me to silence – I suppose it would have spoilt their beautifully crafted tale, all that fine-tuned balancing of the number of words allocated to me (4:2-3) with those of *ribbono sh’oylam*, the Maestro of the Universe, who always has to have the last word (4: 10-11). The moral upper hand.

Well, not this time, now it’s my time. “I am right to be angry – until it’s time to die” (4:9) – yes, that is what I said. And I’m still angry, dead right to be angry, and you need to know why: because if you aren’t angry, you aren’t paying attention ...

What’s that? You’re upset by my tone? Or is it that you’re just surprised to be hearing from me? Why? We characters never die. We stay around: on the page, in the imagination, in art and litera-

⁵ *The Guardian*, 5th May 2018.

⁶ See the quotation from Exodus 34:6-7 narrating God’s manifold attributes, which is placed in the mouth of Jonah in 4:2. The Exodus text balances a description of God’s compassion with a description of how the guilty *do not* remain unpunished. The storytellers edit the text in favour of God’s benign qualities – and leave Jonah feeling suicidal.

ture and in the human heart, or in settings like this, waiting for our moment. Sure, it's comfortable here – 'Heaven's Gate: Retirement Home for Aged Legends' – plenty of time to think of what has been, or what might have been. But we all seek a little action, a little attention, a guest appearance here or there (though most of us draw the line at Fox News), a chat show or documentary, that's fine, a chance to shine, to tell anew our self-mythologizing tales. Or set the record straight. That's my job now. So: are you sitting comfortably? This is just me warming up.

2. 'A Time to Flee ...'

Where to begin? Let's start with my name. They called me Jonah – Jonah ben Amittai – which was witty (and generous) of them, because Jonah ben Amittai had been a prophet, the real thing, back in the days of Jeroboam⁷, back in the days when it's said that God cared about His people, was determined they would survive, regardless. The way they told that story, there was no need for repentance, neither from the backsliding people nor from the king, a man who pleased himself, who was only interested in expanded borders: a Greater Israel, so to speak (2 Kings 14:23-27). Read the story. The Holy One of Israel couldn't bear to see his special project come to nothing – as long as the people had the land, morality could wait: that was the message the original prophet Jonah ben Amittai carried to an isolated people, who had enemies on all sides; and so it came to pass in the days of Jeroboam.

That was some history to carry on my shoulders – an ambiguous story, if I may say so, of undeserved salvation, no human action necessary, no repentance, just the Holy One's inscrutable grace determining the fate of the community. So you see, I reckoned that if God can do that anyway, what was the point of me doing anything when my turn came? You wonder why I fled? God would do what God would do: salvation, destruction, all in a day's work, a millennium's work, no logic of ours can make sense of how it works.

Sure, we're told that '*repentance and prayer and good deeds avert the evil decree*'⁸. Really? Is that really how it works? Tell that to the six million. Oh yes, I'm up to date with things. Don't be shocked. I read the daily news: I saw the Crusades, I saw Cortés and Mao and Pol Pot, and Stalin's gulags. I saw how beliefs, ideologies, too much God-intoxication, or messianic hopefulness, or deranged nationalism, make men cruel. We have cable TV here, all the channels: I keep my eye on what goes on, every day – I see the agony of Syria, her burning children, her refugees, the flotsam of history, the shipwrecked adrift on the seas, or those who have no saving vessel to fish them up, hold them secure, then vomit them onto dry land. I watch it, just like you watch it. So why don't you "rise up ... and cry out, for the evil that arises" before you? (1:2). You wonder why I turned my back on it all? When you look at me – you are looking in a mirror. Can you see your own wish not to know? Your own avoidance of taking responsibility? When you look at me, can you see your own flight?

Where is your Tarshish? In the shopping centre? In drink, or drugs, or the sanctuary of the therapist's room? In scholarship? In prayers to your forgiving God? In 'on the one hand ... on the other hand' sophistry? In signing petitions to ease your conscience? It's easy to judge me – but my story judges you. Can you deny it?

Sorry, sorry, I get carried away sometimes. It's the anger, you see. I want you to feel as bad as I was feeling when I saw that the Ninevites had got away with it. There was no justice in the world. And it enraged me – but I had nowhere to put those feelings, except to turn them against myself. Yes, they told that part of my story well: the suicidal impulses, the aggression turned against myself. But they never explained it, they didn't understand what I had begun to see then, and see so

⁷ Jeroboam II (788-747 BCE).

⁸ Yom Kippur liturgy (literal translation of the Hebrew).

clearly now. But bear with me, let me unbind the wounds in my own time. The anger's still raw. It's never left me. It's why in the end they had to censor my story. Why they couldn't let me have the last word.

OK, where was I? – Yes, my name was Jonah too – a fortunate coincidence they made use of to tell their tale. But can you imagine the burden of being saddled with the name of a genuine prophet when I was ... well, what was I? At least those who told my story had the decency – the artful tact – never to name me 'prophet' in their tale. Sure, my story ended up being included with the books of the other ones, the true prophets, but in all honesty – ha, 'honesty': fake that and you've got it made – in all honesty, I was no prophet: I looked away, as one does. And down I went: down to Jaffa, down into the boat, down within the boat (1:3-5), retreating further and further and further inside myself. As one does. Down into the depths of sleep, that ancient help-less sleep they say comes from the gods, auguring moments of transformation.⁹ Though not for me. My sleep was the sleep of depression, of regression, of a man turning his anger inwards, too angry to speak. Too angry to cry out against the injustice of the world. Too angry to rage against the evil that is done to us, that we do to each other. "Was I sleeping, while others suffered? Am I sleeping now?"¹⁰ My sleep enacted that deep wish not to know. Willed unconsciousness. For who can truly bear to know? How can we look into the eye of the moronic inferno around us and retain our sanity? Let the storms rage around us! And while they do, we sleepwalk over the edge. And call it fate.

"And the lot fell upon Jonah" (1:7). Just my luck. My fate. "There is an infinite amount of hope in the universe ... but not for us".¹¹ You know, those sailors are the true heroes of the story. Anonymous strangers, who didn't know me from Adam, they refused to sacrifice me to save their own lives: their common humanity, their awareness that we are all guests upon this planet, at the mercy of the gods – or God, or randomness – that shared sense of our common vulnerability in the face of the forces of nature and history led them to try to save me from what had to happen. What the story dictated needed to happen. They were just characters too, remember, their fate written from above. But they were heroes nonetheless. They did everything humanly possible to save my life – my "innocent blood" (1:14) – before they were forced to bow to the inevitable. I will not forget their care, their kindness, their compassion. *Menschlichkeit*, my grandmother would call it, something beyond race and religion, I'm not sure I have it, but I recognised it when I saw it.

Meanwhile, I needed to go further down, into the depths: the dark night of the soul when we face our own mortality, and our own compromises, and discover if the sparks of courage have entirely died out.

The sailors taught me: we must love one another – or die.
Later I realised: we must love one another – and die.¹²

⁹ The Biblical word *tardemah*, which is differentiated from the normal word for 'sleep', is used to describe a numinous sleep or unconscious state that descends on Biblical characters on rare occasions: Genesis 2:21; 15:12. Judges 4:21. 1 Samuel 26:12.

¹⁰ Vladimir in Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*.

¹¹ Franz Kafka, in conversation with Max Brod (quoted in Walter Benjamin, 'Franz Kafka – On the Tenth Anniversary of his Death', 1934, in *Illuminations*, Pimlico, 1999, p. 114).

¹² The last line of W.H. Auden's poem 'September 1st, 1939', first published on October 18th 1938 in *The New Republic* in New York, was subsequently changed by the poet, who looked back on his earlier rhetoric as being 'infected with an incurable dishonesty.' (cf. Seamus Perry, 'That's What Wylan Says', in *London Review of Books*, 10 May 2018). Perhaps one hallmark of spiritual / psychological maturity is the capacity to look back at one's previous rhetorical certainties and revise them – or abandon them – in the light of new understanding or new realities.

3. 'A Time to Regress ...'

Someone must have been telling lies about Jonah A., for without having done anything wrong he was thrown into the sea. Jonah the Hebrew, three days dead to the world, forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell, and the profit and loss, and was swallowed up. He passed the stages of his age and youth, entered the vortex, his mind gone. Oh you, who turn the wheel and look to windward, consider me now. Take pity. These fragments I have shored against my ruins.¹³

Jonah's prayer-poem? I look at it now and wonder where it came from. It's a pastiche, a mash-up of holy lines and sacred phrases I did not know I knew, that surfaced as I drowned in angry grief. The currents of despair cascaded through me as I sank into despondency five fathoms deep. Later, much later, they'd call this 'psychotic breakdown' – that terrifying jumble of delusions, hallucinations, the claustrophobia of being trapped inside one's own chaotic mind – "the waters closed in over me, the deep engulfed me ... the bars of the earth closed upon me forever" (2:6-7) – swallowed up by a persecuting intensity of experience when everything that one has lived through, everything that one has feared, takes over the self. There is no outside world. You are in a timeless capsule, impenetrable to reason, colonised by one's own fantasies, one's own paranoia, you might just as well be buried alive, or at the bottom of the sea, cut off from all human contact. But at the same time, suddenly, you realise that you are filled with power, grandiosity, you can do anything, you know everything, you can sing and dance and fly and commune with the gods¹⁴, and you can see, you can really see how everything is connected to everything – as the Kabbalists said! – and the divine energy is flooding through creation, through all of life, through sun and storm, through the great fish and the lowly worm, through gourds and grazing herds, divinity pulsating in every fibre of being, your being, my being, all of being: so who now is sane and who is mad?

Then sometimes – thanks be to God, or luck, or a cocktail of drugs, or being held in love and nursed back to life – you return from the deepest despair which is devoid of hope, and from the lofty vision intense with meaning and illumination that none can bear too long – and you are restored to the vicissitudes of everyday life. A lesser evil.

Miraculous to recall now those words, sentences, images, buried deeper than consciousness, swirling like strands of seaweed in my mind, they came from I knew not where, that collage of old texts, filaments of God's creation: they came unbidden, from books I'd read, songs I'd heard, stories told to me on stormy nights, even prayers I thought I'd left behind – and they wove together a cradle of hope that sustained me when all was lost.¹⁵

This is what a tradition can do – a God-haunted culture soaked in words – which I, a Hebrew, had imbibed with my mother's milk and my father's devotion to the story of his tribe. I never knew it's value until those three days and nights when my mind slipped away with the tides, and I found salvation in that bounteous treasure-house from which, like a child building worlds out of scattered bricks and clods of earth, I built me a tower of words that reached up to heaven, suffering a sea-change into something rich and strange – and I was delivered back onto dry land once more. Oh divine deliverance.

How soon it fades.

¹³ Cf. *passim*, T.S. Eliot, 'Death by Water' and 'What the Thunder Said', *The Waste Land* (1922).

¹⁴ 2:3-5,8-10.

¹⁵ *Jonah* 2:3 – see Psalms 18:7, 30:3, 118:5, 120:1, 130:1-2. *Jonah* 2:4 – see Psalm 42:8. *Jonah* 2:5 – see Psalm 31:23. *Jonah* 2:6 – see Psalms 18:5-6, 69:2. *Jonah* 2:7 – see Psalms 30:4, 71:20. *Jonah* 2:8 – see Psalms 142:4, 143:4 and Psalms 5:8, 18:7, 88:3. *Jonah* 2:9 – see Psalm 31:7. *Jonah* 2:10 – see Psalms 42:5, 50:14,23, 66:13, 3:9.

4. 'A Time to See ...'

Sorry: so easily lost. What was I talking about? – Yes, my name: Jonah. *Yona* – you know this, don't you?, I'm telling you what you know, it's what storytellers do: resurrect the dead – *Yona* means 'dove'. I was not a man, a human being who bleeds and cries and rocks himself to sleep because his wife has deserted him and his children think he's a clown: I was a symbol, blessed and cursed with an overdetermined name. Chosen not for any qualities I possessed, but because my name resonated with the stories of old. Do you know what it's like to be a symbol? Trapped in a role? A page torn from the book of life?

They wanted to shape my story around that ancient story of hope. Three times the dove was sent out, twice it returned: once with nothing; once with an olive branch; and once – blessed release! – freed back into everyday life.¹⁶ Oh, those long-lost days of hope: a covenant, forged with all of humanity, not to destroy the earth again, a God who has compassion on humanity¹⁷; and a covenant with my people too, a covenant for the generations, our sacred mission: to be a blessing to all the peoples of the earth.¹⁸ Oh, happy days! The desire to be connected to the life that has gone before, to stand in the ancient places, to hear the undying stories.

Yet they skipped all the literary conventions about real prophets: those oh-so-humble characters who parade their humility, their lack of worth, their tongue-tied hesitancy, their boundless inadequacy. None of that. They just plucked me out of everyday life, a useful idiot of a man, a 'Jonah' they could use. As if I had no inner life. As if their message was all that mattered.

Twice bidden to go out, I first returned with nothing, having fled the task (chapter 1). The second time, I went – and returned, with heavy heart, having done what I was called to do (chapter 3). But I knew that wasn't the end of the story. And so I waited, watching (4:5) – aware that the dove was sent three times. And as I waited, something was eating away inside – the worm of doubt, the worm of experience: what would this God, who prides himself on compassion, have in store for me? But also for them?

And then it dawned on me (4:7): I saw – began to see – that *this story was not about me* (for I was no-one); nor was it about the fate of the *goyim* – for some wanted this tale to tell of God's compassion for those outside the tribe, as if to counter the idea that the Holy One of Israel was a xenophobic God, an ethno-nationalist who favoured 'us' rather than 'them'. The winds blew, the sun struck my head, the gourd – unexpectedly present – withered, then died (4:6-8): there was no shelter, I was exposed, vulnerable; a poor, bare, unaccommodated man – who suddenly knew what this was all about. And I could not bear what I had seen: that God-forsaken, God-damned gourd was a portent of humanity's midnight hour. Yes, "Better for me to die than to live" (4:8-9). To live and see the coming ecocide.¹⁹

Although those pious crafters of the sacred word knew how to tell a story – they were hot on 'magic realism': everyone remembers 'the fish that swallowed Jonah' then spat him out again – even they did not realise what their story, my story, revealed. What if we had got it the wrong way round? God's compassion can't be the last word: pity the day we have to rely on that. Covenant or no covenant, if we look to God to do our work we *will wither like the gourd*. Without *our* compassion for the life of the planet, for the well-being of all its creatures and all forms of life, then

¹⁶ Genesis 8: 8-12.

¹⁷ Genesis 9: 12-16.

¹⁸ Genesis 12: 2-3 ff.

¹⁹ Ecocide: the ecological collapse and destruction of large areas of the natural environment as a consequence of human activity.

drought will come, the land will fail, and sinking beneath the waves will be no storyteller's metaphor but our common fate on this our only home.²⁰

The dove went out three times. But I was never sent that third time. They stopped the story there. I suppose they wanted to keep hope alive, although it meant betraying what I'd seen. So I was left with my anger, for I did have something more to say. Thank you for this opportunity to speak, for what it's worth: my blessed release.

I've had to live, these millennia, so often silent, while God's angels, and his minions on earth, sing of God's compassion. I've been stranded, in the text, reliving the moment when Jonah "made himself a shelter ... until he would see what would happen" (4:5). I'm still waiting, watching: waiting for *our* compassion, our divine compassion, to shine upon the earth. To redeem the earth. And those who live upon it.

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²⁰ The ice sheets in Greenland and the Antarctica have begun to collapse: 'marine ice sheet instability'. The Paris Agreement (2016) was based on reports that they would remain stable and sea levels would rise by a metre by 2100. In 2017, in the light of this new phenomenon, the pre-eminent climate science agency in the USA revised estimates dramatically upwards: sea levels will rise by 2.5 metres. Last a year a study added in carbon emissions at the current level: sea levels will rise by 3.35 metres. From Amsterdam to Bangladesh, New York to Florida to London, cities will go under water, property values will collapse, new economic recessions will put all previous ones into the shade; 145 million people around the globe live a metre or less above sea level: millions will be displaced, generations of climate refugees will make the current Syrian refugee crisis just the small beginning of a fundamental re-shaping of civilisation.