

Victor and Victim in Philip Roth's "Counterlife"

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Abstract

The paper argues that in Philip Roth's novel, *The Counterlife* (1988), which engages the question of Palestine, the author's attempt to introduce a balanced view of the Arab-Israeli conflict is undermined by a narrative strategy that favors the victor and deprives the victim from entering the text except as a non-person or a decadent oriental. An application of what Edward Said calls "contrapuntal reading" to Roth's text reveals that the author's tendency to offer a neutral presentation of the Middle East issue is thwarted by a hegemonic master narrative - originated in Orientalism and Western imperialism - that either removes the Palestinian subaltern out of the fictional text or conflates him with a status of cultural inferiority and barbarism by assigning him a role which conforms to his image in the colonial taxonomy of inferior races.

In Culture and Imperialism, Edward Said develops a link between imperialist and post-colonial narratives using a hermeneutics of interpretation called "contrapuntality" (Said 1993: 93) in order to explore colonial texts. Incorporating western canonical novels, Said advocates a discursive strategy which aims to prevent hostility between East and West by integrating a counter-discourse dynamics able to uncover colonial implications hidden in western texts:

As we look back at the cultural archive, we begin to reread it not univocally but contrapuntally, with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts (Said 1993: 51).

Scrutinizing Roth's Middle East novel, The Counterlife, it becomes obvious that the book could be interpreted in two different ways. On the surface, the text gives an immediate impression that the author aims to introduce the Palestinian-Israeli conflict from a neutral perspective different from anti-Arab treatments advocated by pro-

Zionist writers well-known in the American literary canon. Nevertheless, a contrapuntal reading of the novel provides evidence that writing can never be a neutral activity. Interpreting the Middle East conflict in terms that the West could easily accept, the author develops a narrative strategy through which the displaced Palestinian is either silenced or assigned a status of inferiority and decadence. In other words, the authorial attempt to create a Palestinian counter narrative of the Arab-Israeli conflict is totally undermined by a plethora of pro-Zionist voices which dominate the fictional text deploying colonial discourses about the depravity of non-western races and the invalidity of indigenous struggle for independence. Further, the orientalizing process which targets the dispossessed Palestinian in addition to the absence of a moderate voice to represent a counter attitude toward the Arab-Israeli conflict reinforces the militant and anti-Arab discourse of Roth's master narrative dominated by a pro-Zionist imperial voice. Due to the hegemonic struc-

ture of Roth's master narrative, the Middle East issue is unfortunately viewed from the perspective of the victorious side.

In The Question of Palestine, Edward Said points out:

The Zionist took it upon themselves to explain the Oriental Arab to the West, to assume responsibility for expressing what the Arabs were really like and about, never to let the Arabs appear equally with them as existing in Palestine (Said 1980: 26).

In The Counterlife, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is depicted from the viewpoint of the triumphant Zionist while the defeated Palestinians are totally muted and denied a reasonable voice to express their attitude toward the long-term conflict. Viewing the Palestinian subalterns as vicious assassins and vile sadists, Roth's master narrative is characterized by what Jacques Derrida calls "violence of the letter" which is some sort of violence "of difference of classification and of the systems of appellations" (Derrida 1976:

110). Unequivocally, most of Roth's narrative is controlled by Zionist or pro-Zionist voices which, from the perspective of a neutral reader, are fully justified in their support of Zionism as a nationalist movement saving the holocaust survivors from European anti-Semitism and Diaspora and establishing a homeland for the Jews on the land of Israel. However, the monolithic narrative strategy of Roth's fiction is not justified in either marginalizing the Oriental Jews as second class citizens or essentializing the Arab Palestinians as upholders of a degraded, regressive and violent culture. The author assigned the central roles, in his novel, to Euro-American Jews while the oriental Jews are either silenced or marginalized. Like the Palestinians, the oriental Jews, in Roth's narrative, are victims of a racist/imperialist ideology which aims to banish them out of an Israeli community modeled on the western style. While the Arabs/Palestinians are muted, in Roth's novel, the oriental Jews are given inferior roles and forced to tackle works which western Jews are reluctant to do. By humiliating the Palestinians (in addition to the oriental Jews) and glorifying western Zionism as a Utopian ideology, the master narrative of Roth's novel creates a distinction "between democratic Israel and a homogenously non-democratic Arab world in which the Palestinian, dispossessed and exiled by Israel, came to represent 'terrorism' and little beyond it" (Said 1993: 261).

Linking Orientalism to colonial conquest, Edward Said argues that the relationship between western colonizers and colonized Orientals is

one of power and domination where the colonizer makes use of imaginative speculations to produce erroneous stereotypes of the Orient. Said also illustrates that in colonial narratives, colonized people are viewed as being "naturally subservient to a superior, advanced, developed, and morally mature [power]" (Eagleton et al 1990: 72). In Roth's novel, which is a reproduction of western colonial narratives, the displaced Palestinians are transformed into cultural objects, orientalized and marginalized to conform to their image in colonial taxonomy of inferior races. Since the destruction of native images is a recurrent, almost a ritualistic practice in colonial discourses, the Palestinian subaltern, in Roth's novel, is either denied a voice or appears in the single image of a fundamentalist, anti-Semitic demon. In this context, the Palestinian refugee is fictionally exploited to affirm anti-Arab discourses integral to American fiction about the Middle East.

Portraying the Arab-Israeli conflict from the perspective of the winner and taking over the typology inherent in western culture of a degraded Orient confronting the Occidental, the narrative discourse of Roth's novel categorizes the Palestinian as inferior and fearsome. Unfortunately, the invisibility of a Palestinian voice in The Counterlife and his frequent appearance in the speeches of Zionist narrators to play a role which conforms to his degraded image in western culture provides an impetus to the fundamentalist colo-

nial discourse of the text. Instead of presenting the Arab-Israeli dispute from a balanced perspective, Roth's master narrative, overwhelmed with an anti-Arab discursive strategy, becomes a reproduction of western stereotypes about inferior races strengthening the boundaries of racial and cultural differences between the Palestinians and the Israeli people, between Western and oriental Jews. Further, the dispersion of an imperialist version of Zionism in the text of The Counterlife obscures the Palestinian Question and transforms the book into a colonial narrative neglecting the rights of the oppressed.

In Culture and Imperialism, Edward Said underlines the importance of confronting the Arab-Israeli issue but raises doubts about the validity of current approaches to solve the conflict:

Ever since the Second World War, it has been impossible to evade either the Arab-Israeli conflict or the study of individual societies in academic "Middle Eastern Studies". Thus to write about the Palestinian issue at all required one to decide whether the Palestinians were a people (or national community) which in turn implied supporting or opposing their right to self-determination (Said 1993: 260).

In The Counterlife, the Arab-Israeli issue is explored from a relatively objective perspective different from biased treatments of the Middle East conflict integral to

American literature. Nevertheless, the invisibility of Palestinian characters in the text, the marginalized status of the oriental Jews and the use of a narrative strategy that advocates the viewpoint of the victor gives credibility to Said's argument in The Question of Palestine that

between Zionism and the West there was and still is a community of language and of ideology, so far as the Arab was concerned, he was not part of this community (Said 1980: 25).

The narrative of The Counterlife involves the journey of Nathan Zukerman, an assimilated American Jew, to Israel where he met his brother Henry who immigrated to the Hebrew State, changed his name into Hanock and joined a militant Zionist organization "Agor" which calls for the transfer of the Palestinian people outside the borders of historical Palestine including the West Bank. Regardless of the marginal opposition to the colonial prospect advocated by Mordecai Lippman, the leader of the messianic Zionist movement, mentioned above, it is obvious that Lippman's radical narrative of the Arab-Israeli conflict occupies the centre of Roth's text. The absence of Palestinian characters (except for the owners of a Palestinian restaurant who treat Nathan with respect), the minor roles given to the oriental Jews and the limited narrative landscape given to moderate Zionists such as Shuki Elchanan, an Israeli journalist who calls for peaceful coexistence between the Arabs and the Jews, prioritizes Lippman's militant perspective and provides an impetus for his racist views.

By obscuring the Palestinian perspective and marginalizing moderate Jewish/Zionist viewpoints, the narrative strategy of The Counterlife produces a prevailing view of the Arab-Israeli conflict that ignores the victims and advocates the opinion of the victorious side. Unfortunately, the author seems to support the fanatic perspective of Lippman, who wants to solve the Palestinian Question, according to The Old Testament agenda, by reclaiming the West Bank as Judea and banishing the Palestinians outside the land of Israel that originates in the Torah. Further, the author underlines similar militant views advocated by radical Zionists such as Nathan's kinsman whom he calls, Uncle Shimmy, a militant Zionist who urges the Jews to "bomb the Arab bastards till they cry uncle" (Roth 1988: 42). Unfortunately, radical attitudes like Shimmy's are given credibility in a text categorizing the Palestinians as assassins who burn Israeli school buses in order to bring havoc to the Israeli cities.

The valorization of the militant views of Uncle Shimmy and Mordecai Lippman who consider the West Bank (Judea and Samaria) as Israeli land ignoring Palestinian existence turns Roth's novel into an imperialist text which depicts the Arab population of Palestine as backward people occupied by a superior race. By shutting out the Palestinians from Roth's master narrative, they remain in their non-place as native savages. Moreover, the authorial adoption of Lippman's version of the

Arab-Israeli conflict where the humiliated Palestinian is introduced only through the eyes of the Western Zionist opponent intensifies the hegemonic overtones of the text. For example, Lippman openly declares that he is against any peace treaty with the Palestinians and he justifies his opinion: "The Arabs will take what is given and then continue the war and instead of less trouble there will be more" (Roth 1988: 130). Aiming to present the Palestinians as deceptive and blood-thirsty people, Roth's narrative deploys colonial discourses which consider the reconciliation between the Arabs and Jews in Palestine as "remote, ridiculous dreams" (Ngugi 1986: 3).

In this context, the hostile and racist attitude of Lippman toward the Palestinian refugees becomes a testimony of Edward Said's opinion that Zionism is a reproduction of nineteenth century European imperialism. According to Said, Theodore Herzl appropriated and domesticated Zionism from European colonialism in order to serve the "needs of a developing Jewish nationalism" (Said 1980: 72). Therefore, one may argue that The Counterlife is a colonial text which reproduces discourses in conformity with western imperialism by prioritizing a Zionist narrative which views the indigenous inhabitants (Arabs and Jews) of Palestine as inferior and irrelevant. Historically, Zionism was a counter movement aiming to confront an age of the most vicious anti-Semitism in the West; however, it

coincided with the emergence of European colonialism in Third World countries which oppressed the native inhabitants of the colonized territories. But since Zionism aims primarily to save western Jews from anti-Semitism, there is no justification that Occidental Jews who were victims of European anti-Semitism became oppressors of Palestinian Arabs and Oriental Jews (Said 1980: 69).

The sympathy toward two thousand years of Jewish suffering and victimization culminating in the holocaust should not, however, lead to the justification of Zionist brutalities against the Palestinian people and should not happen "at the expense of Palestinian Arab silence in the western marketplace of ideas" (Said 1980: 58). However, in The Counterlife, Lippman's narrative about Palestinians throwing stones at Israeli cars and rolling Molotov grenades into his house in the West Bank is underlined and perpetuated to justify his militancy against the Palestinian people. Locating Lippman's radical narrative at the center of the text is in itself an act of justification, even support, for his fanatic perspective which considers the deportation of the Palestinians out of the West Bank as morally acceptable. Even Nathan, the American Jew who isolates himself from the Western Wall, the most sacred place of the Jews, glorifies Lippman as a national hero committed to defend Jewish victims against Palestinian aggression. Explicitly, Lippman's radical views about the Palestinians are highlighted by an imperial narrator who points out that "Lippman is a patriot and devout believer, whose morality is plain and unambiguous,

whose rhetoric is righteous and readily accessible" (Roth 1988: 185). To Henry, Lippman, the chair of the Agor organization, is a symbol of power and authority regardless of the injuries and war scars he carries from military confrontations with the Arabs particularly the Six Day War, 1967.

Apparently, the positive attitude of Roth's narrative toward the leader of a militant and racist movement, that aims to annihilate the Palestinian subalterns, besides, the lack of sympathy toward the Palestinian victims could be considered as evidence of Said's argument about "the identification of Zionism and liberalism in the West" (Said 1980: 38) which leads to the banishment of the displaced and dispossessed in Palestine. In The Question of Palestine, Said clarifies this point:

The fear of treading upon the highly sensitive terrain of what [Zionists] did to their victims, in an age of genocidal extermination of the Jews leads to almost total absence of any handily available historical knowledge from non-Zionist sources (Said 1980: 59).

Due to the preceding argument, the Israeli army is idealized in Roth's novel and depicted as an institution which uses violence against Palestinian refugees only in exceptional situations whereas the Palestinians and the Arabs are frequently viewed as savage barbarians who deserve to be punished. An Oriental Jew, who works as a taxi driver, told Nathan Zukerman that his only son was killed by the Arabs showing him a picture of a

young man in army uniform: "Someone is shooting a bomb. He is no more there. No shoes, nothing, killed. I never see my son no more" (Roth 1988: 106). Depicting the Arabs as brutal and merciless people, Nathan recalls images of Israeli suffering and sacrifices resulting from Arab violence and aggression. For example, he remembers the horrible massacre of Shuki's brother at the hands of the Syrians during the Six-Day War, 1967. Shuki told Nathan that after the defeat of the Syrians, his brother together with other soldiers from his captured platoon were found dead and mutilated:

Their hands tied behind them to stakes in the ground; they had been castrated, decapitated, and their penises stuffed in their mouths. Strewn around the abandoned battlefield were necklaces made of their ears (Roth 1986: 70).

The disgusting scene mentioned above, which is a reproduction of American narratives about the brutality of American enemies in the wild West or in Vietnam, is an indication that Roth's text attempts to disseminate discourses affirming the conventional image of the Arab as a merciless barbarian who is not different from other "savages" such as Negroes, Viet Cong, "Red Indians or Maoris" (cited in Said 1980: 80).

The horrible scenes provided by the author which portray the Arab as a barbaric assassin as well as the absence of scenes incorporating counter Israeli violence against the Palestinians and the Arabs

legitimatize Lippman's militant ideology and justifies colonial racism and superiority. Because the Arabs constitute "practically the only ethnic group about whom in the West, racial slurs are tolerated, even encouraged" (Said 1980: 26), Roth's text celebrates anti-Arab discourses reminiscent of those deployed by nineteenth-century colonial narratives. In other words, the subterranean Zionist agenda which constitutes the subtext of Roth's narrative unfortunately plays a vital role in proliferating negative stereotypes about Arabs and Palestinians linking Zionism with western imperialism and undermining its historical mission as a movement aiming to secure a sanctuary for the holocaust survivors. In The Question of Palestine, Said elaborates on the link between Zionism and European imperialism:

There is unmistakable coincidence between the experience of Arab Palestinians at the hands of Zionism and the experiences of the black, yellow, and brown peoples who were described as inferior and subhuman by nineteenth-century imperialists (Said 1980: 689).

Nevertheless, the Zionist colonialist attitude toward the Arab inhabitants of Palestine is totally different from "other nineteenth-century European powers, for whom the natives of outlying territories were included in the redemptive mission *civilisatrice*" (Said 1980: 68). For example, Mordecai Lippman, the founder of the Zionist movement in The Counterlife, wants to transfer the Palestinians outside the territories of Israel, as mentioned in the Torah, including the West Bank in

order to establish a purely racist Jewish state.

There is no doubt that the master narrative of Roth's text reinforces Lippman's fanatic vision and colonial project. Even moderate Israeli Zionists like Shuki Elchanan, a friend of Nathan, who wants Israel to give the West Bank to the Palestinians and who castigates the militant ideology of Lippman's Zionist organization, changes his commitments toward the end of the novel. In the first part of the novel, Lippman's militant Zionism is compared to the moderate position of Shuki who does not accept Lippman's violent policy toward the Palestinians. In a sarcastic overtone, Shuki criticizes Lippman's hostile attitude because it blocks the way toward any potential peaceful coexistences between the Palestinians and the Jews:

Lippman drives into Hebron with his pistol and tells the Arabs in the market how the Jews and Arabs can live happily side by side as long as the Jews are on top. He's dying for somebody to throw a Molotov cocktail. Then his thugs can really go to town (Roth 1988: 83).

In the preceding lines, Shuki views Lippman as an aggressive invader who violates the peace of Hebron city and its inhabitants by creating violence and provoking the Arabs. However, Shuki's position toward the leader of a racist movement, which calls for the slaughter of the subaltern Palestinians, undergoes some sort of metamorphosis, reflected in his letter to Nathan which reveals sympa-

thy toward Lippman's militancy. He even attempts to convince Nathan that Lippman is a man of principles, who, regardless of his fanaticism, is a defender of the Jewish people.

Further, Shuki begs Nathan not to denounce Lippman's extreme views simply because he has not seen Lippman's Arab/Palestinian counterpart:

You haven't met Lippman's Arab counterpart yet and been assaulted head-on by the wildness of his rhetoric. I'm sure that at Agor you will have heard Lippman talking about the Arabs and how we must rule them, but if you haven't heard the Arabs talk about ruling, if you haven't seen them ruling, then as a satirist you're in for an even bigger treat. Jewish ranting and bullshitting there is - but, however entertaining you may find Lippman's, the Arab ranting and bullshitting has a distinction all its own, and the characters spewing it are no less ugly (Roth 1988: 183).

The argument that Lippman's militant perspective is the counterpart of a fundamentalist Palestinian attitude, probably the radical Islamic movements in the occupied territories, does not open horizons for mutual dialogues between the two peoples; instead, it endorses the fanatic Zionist agenda embedded in Roth's narrative. The notion that Lippman's extreme perspective is the counterpart of a similar militant project on the other side of the border seems to be reasonable, however it gives priority

to radical voices that would push the Arab-Israeli conflict to a fatal and catastrophic end.

The dilemma of Roth's master narrative stems from its failure to deploy positive discourses leading to mutual perception of the human suffering of both sides. Roth's narrative which incorporates an anomalous imperialist variety of Zionism that deals with the Palestinians as "an inferior native other" (Said 1980: 69) inevitably leads all Palestinians, regardless of their political positions, to recoil from Zionism. Unfortunately, Roth's narrative endorses Lippman's militant Zionism which explicitly "appeared to be an uncompromisingly exclusionary, discriminatory, colonialist praxis" (Said 1980: 69) distinguishing between privileged western Jews and subaltern Arabs (Palestinians and oriental Jews). In this context, it is impossible for the Palestinians to understand the historical tragedy and human suffering of the Jews simply because they see Zionism only as "an ideology and a practice keeping them and [oriental] Jews imprisoned" (Said 1980: 70). Further, by delineating the Palestinian as a barbarian and savage brute who seeks Jewish blood everywhere, Roth's narrative prevents the Jews as well from understanding "the human tragedy caused the Arab Palestinians by Zionism" (Said 1980: 70).

The focus on narratives of superiority and militancy advocated by Lippman and his fellows, who are given a substantial space in the textual landscape in addition to the elimination and silencing of moderate Palestinian voices transform Roth's narrative into a colonial fiction. In-

tegral to this colonial ethos is the radical change that comes across Shuki's attitude toward Lippman's racist project. In the beginning of the novel, Shuki considers Lippman's organization as a corrupt institution that attempts to enforce a solution of the Palestinian-Israeli issue in the light of the Old Testament's prophecies. He criticizes this option because it contradicts with the contemporary political situation in the region. As a liberal Zionist, Shuki categorically denounces any approaches toward the Middle East conflict that would involve instructions mentioned in the Torah. He argues that: "Everything going wrong with this country is in the first five books of the Old Testament. Smite the enemy, sacrifice your son, the desert is yours and nobody else's all the way to the Euphrates. A body count of dead Philistines on every other page - that's the wisdom of their wonderful Torah" (Roth 1988: 84). Shuki, in a sarcastic manner, criticizes the attitude of militant Jews toward the Arab-Israeli conflict: "If they want so much to sleep at the Biblical source because that is where Abraham tied his shoelaces, then they can sleep there under Arab rule" (84). Nevertheless, Shuki almost changed his view toward militant Zionist movements and ideologies when he sent a message to Nathan justifying the fanatic agenda advocated by Lippman's organization.

The change that comes over Shuki's attitude, like the ideological transformation which Henry Zukerman undergoes, is integrated into the politics of colo-

nization. In his pioneering study The Colonizer and the Colonized, Albert Memmi argues that colonial existence "manufactures colonialists, just as it manufactures the colonized" (Memmi 1974: 57). Explicitly, the traumatic impact of colonization, military occupation and history of blood complicates the relationship between colonizer and colonized, between oppressor and oppressed. In the beginning of the narrative, Roth introduces Shuki as a moderate Israeli Zionist who believes that Palestinians should be given a state on the territory of Gaza and the West Bank but later he justifies the agenda of Mordecai Lippman's movement which calls for the removal of the Palestinian people out of historical Palestine. According to Memmi, the colony transforms the immigrant into a colonizer changing his personality and attitudes. The colonizer, according to Memmi, "finds himself on one side of a scale, the other side of which bears the colonized. The more freely he breathes, the more the colonized are choked" (Memmi 1974: 6). In spite of his awareness of the brutality of colonization and the illegitimacy of Lippman's fanatic movement, Shuki can not openly express condemnation for Lippman because he will be ostracized by the colonial community and eventually deprived of the privileges of being a colonizer.

The endorsement of colonial politics which lies at the core of Roth's master narrative could also be illuminated by involv-

ing the character of Henry Zukerman, an American Jew who immigrated to Israel and settled in a West Bank colony. Like other fanatic Zionists in Lippman's organization, Agor, Henry becomes interested in "the gun" as well as in "Jewish beard" according to Shuki who asks Nathan: "Is your brother as thrilled by the religion as by the explosives" (Roth 1988: 184). When Henry joined Lippman's Zionist movement, he changed his name into Hanock in order to cope up with his new role and identity. According to Memmi, "many immigrants who having recently arrived, timid and modest, suddenly provided with a wonderful title, see their obscurity illuminated by a prestige which surprises even them" (Memmi 1974: 46). The process of orientation for the new immigrant makes him an obstinate defender of colonial privileges and a militant advocate of the colony. In Memmi's words "the immigrant has been transformed into a colonialist" (Memmi 1974: 47). In his attempt to be accepted in the colony, Henry changes his name and identity embracing the militant ideology of Lippman's Zionist organization. Like other immigrants whose views are corrupted by colonization he believes that it is his "human prerogative" to manipulate and manage the nonwhite world (Said 1987: 108). Like Lippman, Henry wants to send all Palestinians into external exiles because to him the colonized "is hardly a human being. He tends rapidly toward becoming an object" (Memmi 1974: 86).

As fanatic settlers, Henry and Lippman are committed to a colonial ideology which is an extension of perspectives enunciated by advocates of western imperialism. In The Question of Palestine, Said

recalls R.S. Macalister's view on the native inhabitants of Palestine:

It is no exaggeration to say that throughout these long centuries the native inhabitants of Palestine do not appear to have made a single contribution of any kind whatsoever to material civilization. It was perhaps the most unprogressive country on the face of the earth. Its entire culture was derivative (cited in Said 1980: 81).

Obviously, the master narrative of Roth's novel, dominated by militant Zionist voices, approaches the Palestinian subaltern the same way the British colonizers dealt with the colonized people in the Third World during the nineteenth century. Further, there is no wide difference between what Lippman says about the Palestinians in Roth's fiction and what Tyrwhitt Drake, a British scholar, says in reality: "The fellahin [in Palestine] are all in the worst type of humanity that I have come across in the east. The fellah is totally destitute of all moral sense" (cited in Said 1980: 79). Bluntly, Drake's hostile attitude toward the Palestinian fellahin "Peasants" is due to the fact that Palestinian armed resistance against British occupation is basically supported by Palestinian peasants. In order to undermine the validity of indigenous struggle against colonial powers, the colonizer usually attempts to demonize the colonized viewing his revolution for the sake of independence as erratic violence.

Moreover, the violence and barbarism of the Palestinian natives, according

to Lippman, is associated with Islam which is the religion of the colonized majority in Palestine. As a carrier of western colonialist ethos, Lippman points out that Islam is a brutal power that is determined to annihilate the state of Israel:

Islam is not a civilization of doubt like the civilization of the Hellenized Jew. The Jew is always blaming himself for what happens in Cairo. He is blaming himself for what happens in Baghdad, believe me, they do not blame themselves for what is happening in Jerusalem. Islam is not plagued by niceys and goodies who want to be sure they don't do the wrong thing. Islam wants one thing only: to win, to triumph, to obliterate the cancer of Israel from the body of the Islamic world (Roth 1988: 131).

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