Philip Roth's Self-Reflexive Fiction

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Self-reflexivity and exploration of their own nature and status as fiction, vital concerns of postmodern novels, are recurrent themes in Philip Roth’s fiction. His novels about professors of literature and authors discussing fiction exhibit sustained interest in self-reflexivity as a literary subject. As Sanford Pinsker notes, “Few contemporary writers have been as obsessive, or as exasperating, about the interpenetration of art and life as has Philip Roth” (227). Hillel Halkin argues similarly, “had postmodernism not existed, [Roth] would have been quite capable of inventing aspects of it by himself” (45). This paper examines fiction from the middle and late periods evidencing increasing self-reflexivity, fictions that focus on the manner in which a novelist draws on personal experience to create characters and the ways in which writing fiction are analogous to the processes by which we create and sustain our lives.

The self-reflexive design of My Life As a Man establishes the artistic theme for much of Roth’s work and introduces Nathan Zuckerman, the primary vehicle for Roth’s portrait of an artist. This novel is a thoroughly metafictional work engaging the problem of the artistic mode that best transforms private experience into art. Through his alter ego, the fictive novelist Peter Tarnapol, who tries to understand himself as a man and a writer by telling the story of his failed marriage through his own fictive novelist, Nathan Zuckerman, Roth demonstrates the writer’s difficulty in achieving detachment from his material. To impart the tale of a writer who creates a fiction about a writer and then comments on the importance of the self to the novelist, Roth bifurcates the novel as “Useful Fictions,” two stories featuring Nathan Zuckerman, and “My True Story,” Tarnapol’s long autobiographical narrative. The three narratives present the writer as “victim and analyst, confessor and interpreter of his own sufferings” (Lee 36). The first of the two alternative fictions, “Salad Days,” details, in an ap-
propriately exuberant and comic tone, Zuckerman’s protected upbringing by doting parents, his undergraduate rebellion against his working class Jewish background under the tutelage of an English professor who inspires him to live a life of books, culture, and genteel manners; his literary triumphs; his sexual conquest of the local zipper king’s daughter, and an army experience that teaches him that he is no longer master of his own destiny. The second fiction, “Courting Disaster,” which alters some biographical details, is a first person narrative of Zuckerman’s metamorphosis from accomplished son to failed husband. The conflicting desires and allegiances Tarnapol indicates characterize his real life are manifested in the dichotomy of Zuckerman’s intellectual seriousness and literary high-mindedness and his continuing involvement with a woman to whom he is perversely drawn, even though he detests making love to her and wants to be rid of her. Zuckerman attributes his role in the disastrous marriage either to his dependence on literature for his ideas or his insufficient understanding of literature’s wisdom. The self-reflective narrator is concerned that his readers may find him an unconvincing character and his use of the realistic mode inappropriate. Tarnapol concludes that an account of Zuckerman’s suffering demands “a darker sense of irony, a grave and pensive voice to replace the amused Olympian point of view” (MLAM 31).

Reinforcing the novel’s self-reflexivity are invented readers and critics of the “Useful Fictions” whose contradictory commentaries echo the judgments of Roth’s critics. Tarnapol’s sister admonishes the writer to find source material distanced from his life. His brother finds connections to Bellow’s Herzog, Mailer’s An American Dream, Miller’s After the Fall, and Malamud’s A New Life. Editors proffer diametrically opposed views. One approves “Salad Days” because it reads to him like an attack on the “prematurely grave and high-minded author,” and attacks “Courting Disaster” as the work of a “misguided and morbid ‘moral’ imagination” (MLAM 116-17). The other views “Salad Days” as “smug, and vicious, and infuriating, all the more so for being so clever and winning” and finds “Courting Disaster” “absolutely heartrending” (MLAM 117). Roth devastatingly spoofs editorial idiom and reviewers’ gibberish in these radically divergent readings.

Finally, Tarnapol forsakes the fictitious, and the guise of an alter ego, to write the autobiographical essay, “My True Story,” synthesizing the comic and sober tones of the “Useful Fictions.” Here, he explains his obsession with his wife, whom he married “entirely against [his] inclinations but in accordance with [his] principles” (MLAM 128) and, like Zuckerman, attributes his predicament to literary-induced earnestness and morality. Self-presentation remains problematic and unresolved as Tarnapol worries about whether his self-portrait is factual or fictional, whether words
"born either of imagination or forthrightness" (MLAM 231) can completely capture the reality they represent, "that words, being words, only approximate the real thing" (MLAM 231). Tarnapol discovers that his memoir is taking on the nature of fiction, that the self he wants to describe with fidelity is beginning to seem imaginary. He resolves the aesthetic dilemma of whether to write from the vantage point of Flaubertian distance or the confessional mode of Henry Miller in writing that mediates between those extremes. Tarnapol's biographical details correspond to the publicly known details of Roth's life: similar childhoods, highly praised first books while young, Guggenheim grants, teaching at large Midwestern universities, unhappy marriages to divorcées, and estranged wives who die in automobile accidents. Roth thus continues to confound his audience by incorporating elements in his characters' biographies that transparently parallel public details of his own career and life. Yet, he delights in chiding readers for associating him with his characters.

The Zuckerman Bound trilogy and epilogue delineate the literary and intellectual career of a twentieth-century Jewish American novelist. Roth resurrects Nathan Zuckerman to explore an author's moral and aesthetic stance, as well as the distinctions between fact and fiction, contending that although fiction reworks experience, once experience enters the fictional context it is transformed into something else. In The Ghost Writer, the youthful Zuckerman, like Roth, confronts early charges of anti-Semitism, explains what he considers to be the appropriate relationship between his Jewishness and his art, and declares his independence from forces that would inhibit his imagination. The writer of the early middle period (Zuckerman Unbound) suffers the celebrity and notoriety of literary success, as did Roth, and in the late middle period (The Anatomy Lesson) responds to critical attacks and suffers writer's block and psychosomatic syndrome. In "The Prague Orgy," his final incarnation, in again like Roth, Zuckerman develops associations with east-European authors and achieves artistic and physical regeneration. The germane questions in these novels center on the nature of the artist, the connections between the writer and his roots, and the separation of writer and subject. Roth explores these matters through masterful fusion of fact and fiction.

In the context of a retrospective narrative by a successful novelist, the protagonist of The Ghost Writer recalls the literary and social influences of his early career. A series of post-modern intertextual references and allusions to works of others shape the Bildungsroman/quest convention in the form of an artistic pilgrimage by an emerging author to a literary master from whom he learns something of the writer's craft and the writer's moral responsibility to society. Seeking to clarify his identity as a writer and a Jew, Nathan Zuckerman confers with the reclusive Jewish American writer, E. I. Lonoff, whose spiritual support he covets following his father's de-
nunciation of his work as potentially harmful to the Jewish community. During the visit, Nathan is enlightened as well by Lonoff's wife, a woman disappointed with her husband's approach to life and art, and by Amy Bellette, a beautiful young woman, a Holocaust survivor, brought to the United States by Lonoff and now cataloguing his papers for Harvard. Roth juxtaposes binary oppositions—bad son/good daughter, martyred wife/sensual mistress, biological father/literary father, indulgence/asceticism, Abravanel/Lonoff, stylistic polarities represented by Byron and James—to usher his aspiring writer through encounters influencing his personal and professional maturity.

Titled "Maestro," the opening portion of the novella focuses on Zuckerman as Künstlerroman hero trying to determine whether to embrace the model of restraint and orderly approach to life and art exemplified by Lonoff—thought to be modelled on Bernard Malamud for his work habits and meticulous revision practices—or to emulate the flamboyant, passionate, energetic worldly writer, Abravanel—a cross between the lionized Saul Bellow and self-promoting Norman Mailer. Paralleling the austere Jamesian ideal of perfectionism as rendered in "The Middle Years," which Zuckerman reads in the master's study, is Lonoff's inspirational asceticism. Beyond the master's dedication to art and construction of the perfect sentence, the novice is attracted to Lonoff's fictional subject of "thwarted, secretive, imprisoned souls," (ZB 12) and "the feelings of kinship that his stories had revived ... for our own largely Americanized clan, moneyless immigrant shopkeepers to begin with, who'd carried on a shtetl life ten minutes walk from the pillared banks and gargoyled insurance cathedrals of downtown Newark; ... for our pious, unknown ancestors, ... [and] the sense given by such little stories of saying so much" (ZB 13). Having been rebuked for defaming Jews in his own writing, Zuckerman is in awe of Lonoff's protagonists who, a decade after Hitler, "seemed to say something new and wrenching to Gentiles about Jews, and to Jews about themselves" (ZB 13). Here, Zuckerman operates as secret-sharer to the Philip Roth exorciated by some elements of the Jewish community who were offended by satiric caricatures and the perpetuation of anti-Semitic stereotypes in Good-bye Columbus and by the Jewish mother bashing and sexual highjinks of Portnoy's Complaint.

Using a Joycean pattern in the "Nathan Dedalus" chapter, Roth's portrait of a young Jewish artist traces the writer's relationship to his past, to his family and to his community. The central conflict springs from the biological father's disapproval of the son's writing and the son's search for a spiritual father who will valorize his creative imagination. Echoing the criticism Roth received from Jewish detractors of Goodbye, Columbus, the elder Zuckerman and a local judge enlisted by the father, who are advocates of the parochial world from which the young writer seeks escape, ac-
cuse Nathan of writing stories that disparage Jews and foster anti-Semitism. Judge Wapter’s hilariously censorious letter, comprised of a series of hostile questions, insinuates that Nathan’s fiction would satisfy Julius Streicher or Joseph Goebbels. He closes by advising the young writer to see the Broadway production of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, a work which was lauded by contemporary theater critics, but is criticized by Holocaust historians and literary scholars as a sentimentalized revision of the actual diary and an obfuscation of the Holocaust experience of European Jewry. Wapter’s philistine attack, coupled with his endorsement of the sanitized Broadway version of the Frank diary, only affirms Nathan’s certainty of his own place in the tradition of Flaubert, Joyce, and Wolfe, each “condemned for disloyalty or treachery or immorality by those who saw themselves slandered in their works” (*ZB* 92). The young writer, like Roth’s fictional graduate students and professors of literature, measures himself and his principles against the high-minded ideals of respected literature.

Like Stephen Dedalus, Nathan seeks distance from community; and again, like Stephen, Nathan is preoccupied with the very past and community he seeks to escape. Paralleling Roth’s metamorphosis of Franz Kafka into a Newark Hebrew School teacher, he now facilitates Zuckerman’s encounter with Jewish history by having the fictive novelist transmogrify Lonoff’s refugee-protégé into Anne Frank, secret Holocaust survivor. Thus, the Jewish son who disappointed his parents by “betraying” Jews in his fiction, seeks reconciliation through imagined marriage to the legendary “sainted” Jewish daughter. The Anne engaging Zuckerman’s imagination and love is the novice writer whom he imagines sacrificing reunion with her father in order that, through her assumed death, her art and Holocaust witness may live, the artistic soul who, like himself, desires independence from family, is devoted to free thought and to nonconformity. The ideological attraction of the imagined Anne resides in her analogous anxiety about the double burden of the Jewish writer: aesthetic distance from those one writes about and responsibility to their history.

Through juxtaposition of the Broadway adaptation of *The Diary of Anne Frank* with Zuckerman’s imagined Anne and his denunciation of the popular misreading of her text, the protagonist emerges as an authentic Jew and an authentic writer. Zuckerman’s clearer vision of the meaning of Anne Frank’s life and death resists the erasure of Anne’s Jewishness dominating the sentimental version of the diary and the deracinated play and evokes the catastrophic magnitude of the Holocaust clearly identifying him as an authentic American Jewish writer. As his day of artistic enlightenment nears its conclusion, the novice receives Lonoff’s vaunted benediction, permission to be the writer he wants to be, to declare artistic independence from family and community whose ethical and ethnic con-
strains impede his imagination. Echoing Emerson's greeting of Whitman at the start of his career, Lonoff welcomes Zuckerman not as a carbon copy of himself, but as "a New World cousin in the Babel clan."

Zuckerman Unbound continues to explore the nature of the artist. At mid-career, thirteen years after the time of The Ghost Writer, Nathan has lived through three failed marriages, published four novels, and is coping with celebrity. He is acclaimed and denounced for the outrageously and explicitly sexual Carnovsky, much as Roth was for Portnoy's Complaint. The mail brings an accusation that "it is hardly possible to write of Jews with more bile, contempt, and hatred" (ZB 190). His critics condemn the work as anti-Semitic and, assuming that Carnovsky is autobiographical and that Nathan has breached confidentiality, express sorrow for his parents. Incapable of separating the creator from his creative invention, the fictive readers perceive Zuckerman as Carnovsky in the manner that Roth's readers identified him with Zuckerman. They "had mistaken impersonation for confession" (ZB 190).

The concluding section of the novel, "Look Homeward, Angel," centers on Zuckerman's relations with his family pre- and post-Carnovsky. "Bastard" is Doc Zuckerman's dying utterance to his "apostate son." The father/son antagonism is carried over to the relationship between Zuckerman and his brother Henry, who confirms that the author of Carnovsky is the bastard responsible for their father's decline and death. In an effort to force Nathan's recognition, Henry condemns Nathan's lack of literary restraint, his failure to understand that his writing has consequences: "Everything is exposable! Jewish morality, Jewish endurance, Jewish wisdom, Jewish families,—everything is grist for your fun machine" (ZB 397). Nathan discovers, as did Thomas Wolfe, that one cannot return home. The novel closes with Nathan's visit to the Newark neighborhood of his childhood, now a black ghetto. Everything has changed. The apartment house is surrounded by a chain-link fence and inhabited by people to whom he is a nobody. Filled with a sense of loss, Nathan realizes he is "no longer any man's son, ... no longer some good woman's husband, ... no longer [his] brother's brother" (ZB 404-405). The artist is stripped of the useful past. Zuckerman is truly unbound.

The death of his father and the transformation of Newark at the close of the second book of the trilogy have left the fictional author bereft of subject: "Everything that had galvanized him had been extinguished" (ZB 446). As The Anatomy Lesson opens, Nathan is suffering from writer's block and physical discomfort symptomatic of his psychic angst. A psychoanalyst suggests his incapacity is self-inflicted punishment; that he is suffering because he is "the atoning penitent, the guilty pariah," the "remorseful son," and "author of Carnovsky" (ZB 430). Although Zuckerman rejects
this theory as well as the view that his unconscious is “suppressing his talent for fear of what it’d do next,” (ZB 441) he is bereft of inspiration and the physical stamina to write.

The most hilarious self-reflexive segments of The Anatomy Lesson are the passages on Nathan’s reaction to his nemesis, Milton Appel, a literary critic modeled on Irving Howe. Appel’s critique of Carnovsky and his “reconsideration” of Zuckerman’s fiction in Inquiry burlesques Howe’s “Philip Roth Reconsidered” published in Commentary following the appearance of Portnoy’s Complaint. Having found Zuckerman’s early stories “fresh, authoritative, exact” Appel now dismisses them as “tendentious junk” and unleashes an attack that makes “Macduff’s assault upon Macbeth look almost lackadaisical” (ZB 474-475). Echoing Roth’s dismay with Howe’s review, Nathan is devastated by Appel’s hostility; especially so, because the critic has long been among his literary heroes. As Roth and his colleagues admired Howe’s writing, so Zuckerman revered Appel’s essays in The Partisan Review and idolized the critic for his own battle to distance himself from his Jewish lower-class background. Zuckerman modeled his own style on the Jewish self-consciousness he discovered in the writing of Appel and other contemporary Jewish intellectuals exhibiting “The disputatious stance, the aggressively marginal sensibility, the disavowal of communal ties, the taste for scrutinizing a social event as though it were a dream or a work of art” (ZB 479). Having associated the best of intellectual freedom with the assimilated post-immigrant Jewish sons of Appel’s generation, Zuckerman bitterly resents the critic’s revised assessment for it legitimates Nathan’s middlebrow detractors, middle-class and suburbanite Jews whose taste Appel had despised. The mirth of the passage derives from Nathan’s outlandish revenge. He impersonates Appel as an infamous pornographer and publisher of Lickety Split, a magazine that differs from Playboy only in its sacrifice of intellectual articles that make the latter socially acceptable. In an uproarious bit of post-modernist gamesmanship, Zuckerman continues to dissemble in this outrageous style implicating both Appel and Mortimer Horowitz, a figure resembling Norman Podhoretz, the editor of Commentary, in his grotesque inventions.

Like expatriate writers, fleeing from the homeland in prologue to “spend[ing] the rest of their lives thinking about nothing else,” (ZB 586) Zuckerman fled Newark for Chicago and New York, yet has repeatedly mined Jewish Newark for his fiction. Now that he has lost his subject, he is desperate “sick of raiding … memory and feeding on the past, … sick of channeling everything into writing” (ZB 610). Recalling Mrs. Lonoff’s complaint about her husband in The Ghost Writer, Zuckerman discovers that he is guilty of rejecting life for art. Now, he wants “the real thing, the thing in the raw, and not for the writing but for itself,” (ZB 610) a realization that prompts his decision to abandon literature for medicine. Howev-
er, before Nathan embarks on his new profession, the novel concludes with his emblematic fall against a tombstone in a Jewish cemetery. Nathan’s jaw is fractured and must be wired shut. Roth thus frames the novel with the silenced voice of the writer. In the beginning, the author be- reft of subject, cannot write; in the end, the non-stop talker cannot speak.

The Anatomy Lesson may be read both as an illustration and critique of self-reflexivity. Unlike the writers Roth’s earlier literary men admire—Kafka, James, Chekhov—Zuckerman’s imagination is detached from the world and circumscribed by the universe of the text. Nathan has become too self-absorbed to write good fiction. In Zuckerman, Jonathan Brent ob- serves,

we find not the portrait of the artist brought up to date since Stephen Dedalus, but the portrait of the imagination severed from any world except that contained in the artist’s mind. While it acts to purify and dramatize its own self-creating conflicts, Zuckerman’s imagination is not chastened by any moral, social, political, religious, or even artistic objectives, aside from the requirements of the well-made story. (183)

Zuckerman’s imagination has not freed him intellectually, emotionally, or spiritually; it has simply detached him from ordinary experience and so- ciety. The promising young author of The Ghost Writer is brought to full comprehension of his limitations in The Anatomy Lesson. Unlike the first volume’s concluding validation of the writer’s literary voice, the second and third books close with metaphors of loss and silence. It remains for the trilogy’s epilogue to restore Nathan Zuckerman to literature.

The escape Zuckerman seeks from his profession at the close of The Anatomy Lesson is reversed in “The Prague Orgy.” Here we encounter the regenerated novelist, a respected writer with an international following, a returned Jew on a mission in Prague to recover the Yiddish stories of a Ho- locaust victim, paralleling Roth’s rescue of east European fiction in his ca- pacity as general editor of “Writers from the Other Europe.” Zuckerman secures the manuscripts of a writer purported to be the “Jewish Flaubert” only to have the police confiscate them and expel him from Czechoslovakia on trumped up charges that he is a “Zionist agent.” In Kafka’s city, Zuckerman, like Joseph K, is arrested although he has committed no crime.

The epilogue resolves the trilogy’s tension between connection and separation of the writer’s artistic and communal responsibilities in por- traits of writers struggling to survive and create under a repressive re- gime. In the totalitarian context, Zuckerman learns that “stories aren’t simply stories; it’s what the Czechs have instead of life. Here they have be- come their stories in lieu of being permitted to be anything else” (ZB 762).
Here storytelling is a form of political resistance. In contrast to totalitarian Prague is the city of the writer's imagination, a repository of the Eastern European Jewish past, the site of his childhood World War II era fantasy of Jews buying the city "when they had accumulated enough money for a homeland" (ZB 760). Instead of architectural restoration, he imagines the spiritual redemption of Prague through the flowering of Jewish literature, all the stories, "all the telling and listening to be done, their infinite interest in their own existence, the fascination with their alarming plight, the mining and refining of tons of these stories—the national industry of the Jewish homeland ... the construction of narrative out of the exertions of survival" (ZB 761).

Joseph Cohen reads Zuckerman's effort to restore the Jewish writer to his rightful literary reputation as the reformed protagonist's enactment of the Jewish charitable principle of Tsedakah, and his resistance to Prague's sexual temptations as illustrative of acceptance of Menschlichkeit, the assumption of adult responsibility. The redeemed, compassionate Zuckerman is freed of the pain and obsession that plagued him in The Anatomy Lesson; freed of his resentment when others expected solidarity with Jewish causes. He is now free to engage in literary experimentation in conjunction with exploring Jewish subjects such as those Roth will advance in The Counterlife. Unlike Zuckerman of the earlier books, who championed self and a psychoanalytic interest in self-definition, the redeemed Zuckerman of the epilogue is rooted in history and community evidenced by his retrieval of the work of a persecuted Jewish writer. Zuckerman has progressed beyond the persona who elicited his father's deathbed rebuke and re-establishes his honor as a Jewish son. The trilogy and epilogue are thus framed by literary/cultural pilgrimages to spiritual fathers: first, to the contemporary fictional master who revealed something to the Gentiles about Jews, and to the Jews about themselves in The Ghost Writer; and finally, to Kafka, Roth's progenitor, who sought and found satisfaction in his Yiddish precursors. In privileging these spiritual precursors who are simultaneously literary perfectionists and writers responsive to Jewish civilization, Zuckerman attains his artistic maturity. Hana Wirth-Nesher argues convincingly that "Philip Roth's long odyssey from Newark to Prague is also a turning point in the American Jewish literary tradition, for it marks the passage from a literature of immigration and assimilation into a literature of retrieval, of the desire to be part of a Jewish literary legacy alongside the European and American literary traditions" (228). Zuckerman's pilgrimage to Prague, his spiritual Jerusalem, city of his literary father, has allowed him to pay his respects, to reclaim his artistic integrity, and to ready himself for a trip to the actual Jerusalem in The Counterlife where he will redefine and come to terms with his Jewish identity.
Like the earlier works examining the sources of fiction and the relationship between fiction and autobiography, *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock* are self-reflexive acts, meta-narrations requiring us to know the previous fiction. They pose questions about the writer's art, the conflict between the writer's personal and artistic commitments. Unlike earlier works in which Roth introduced other writers merely to shed light on his texts, themes, and structures, in *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock* he deconstructs his own text.

The incarnation of Nathan Zuckerman in *The Counterlife* may be read in the context of Roth's continuing debate about the truth of fiction. The issue is examined within a self-contradicting literary form meant to dramatize life's transforming unpredictable patterns and to extend self-reflexivity by exhibiting its own configuration as fictional artifice. Departing from his customary adherence to the conventions of realism, Roth now violates these conventions to challenge the realistic view of fiction in an exploration of the nature of storytelling. The novel's five sections juxtapose alternative lives and interpretations of the characters amplifying the fiction's meditation on its own composition. Each first person narrative presents interlocking personal and public histories from disparate points of view and is countered by a connected or opposed account in which Nathan Zuckerman and his younger brother, Henry, live out alternative destinies, live a life counter to the other's and counter to his own, comment on each other's lives, offer corrections and counter interpretations, ultimately transferring the hermeneutic responsibility to readers.

Embedded in the narrations of individual lives and recent Jewish history are questions about the nature of fiction and reality, the purposes of writing and storytelling. As Roth shatters narrative conventions and offers the brothers multiplying contradictory stories (each suffers from heart trouble, experiences impotence, dies, is eulogized, and is revived in a continuous appropriation of one another's stories) he frames questions about the structure of fiction and equations between art and life, about the writer's obligation to self and art, or to those whom his life has touched and invites the reader to navigate the maze.

The choices involve not only counterlives, but counterinterpretations. Characters and readers must choose between distinctive readings of situations. Illustrative are Nathan's revisions of the eulogy for Henry. Following his own undelivered three thousand word eulogy addressing Henry's libidinous motivation for undergoing life-threatening surgery, Nathan twice reinvents the speech. In the "officially authorized version," authorized by the text in chapter one and by Henry's widow, the mourners hear of the husband's loyalty and self-sacrifice, hear that Henry "died to recover the fullness and richness of married love" (TC 26). Displeased with this
version, Nathan invents an undramatized scene, in which his sister-in-law admits her knowledge of Henry's infidelity. The subject is narrative truth.

The novel is most rigorously self-conscious in its concern with textuality in the "Gloucestershire" section which excerpts, revises, and comments upon the text and the act and art of interpretation. Here the narrative provides its own criticism, anticipates the final section, and characters comment on their own fictional status. After Nathan's demise, Henry searches his brother's papers and discovers all but the "Gloucestershire" chapter of the novel we are reading. Henry now realizes, as had Nathan, that brothers understand and experience each other as "deformation(s) of themselves." As the objectified character, Henry rages against "his version, his interpretation, his picture refuting and impugning everyone else's and swarming over everything! ... In his words was our fate—in our mouths were his words" (TC 231-32). Roth's Barthian playfulness assumes an evermore self-reflexive spin as Henry progresses from the sections the readers have completed to the novel's final section entailing Nathan's hiatus in England. Henry now imagines a counterbook redeeming lives from Nathan's distortions, and introduces Maria's repudiation of Nathan's writing. Maria, Nathan's English wife, contributes to the metafictional luster by rebelling against the author and charging that the anti-Semitism attributed to the English and specifically to her sister in the final chapter are really inversions of Nathan's feelings about Christian women. Maria's letter to Nathan, in the "Christendom" chapter, expresses her intention to flee from the text because she cannot abide being mishandled any longer. She even urges Nathan to defy Philip Roth, "to rise in exuberant rebellion against your author and remake your life" (TC 313).

Roth's preoccupation in The Counterlife is the creation of new identities through the imagination. Characters indulge in self-invention and re-invent each other by telling the tale differently. Fairly early in the novel, Zuckerman declares that reality is artificial and fiction genuine, that imagination is "everybody's maker [that] everybody [is] "a conjuration conjuring up everyone else. We are all each other's authors" (TC 145). In place of the given single self, Zuckerman posits "a variety of impersonations ... a troupe of players that [he] can call on when a self is required" (TC 321). We are not characters in search of an author, as Pirandello would have it, but authors ourselves, creating our realities, shaping our lives.

The interpretive challenge posed in Deception arises from Roth's decision to "impersonate" and "ventriloquize" himself. Zuckerman is abandoned. The protagonist is now Philip, a Jewish-American novelist to whom Roth attributes his own publications and biographical detail. Philip shares a multitude of recognizable attributes drawn from Roth's professional experience and personal life. He writes about a character named
Zuckerman; is the author of When She Was Good, Portnoy's Complaint, My Life As a Man, and The Ghost Writer; complains that he writes fiction and is told it is autobiography and writes autobiography that is interpreted as fiction; lives in England; has an English lover; and occasionally visits Czechoslovakia. In a quarrel with his wife, who discovers his notebook recording conversations with his mistress, Philip insists that the notes are invention and charges her with the weakness of his readers who routinely fail to distinguish the real from the imaginary. Accustomed to Roth's repeated objections to interpretations linking him to his protagonists, readers of Deception are treated to the author's inversion of his complaint as he playfully overturns the principle of separation, encouraging readers confuse Philip with Roth.

The narrative eschews exposition and is composed almost entirely of dialogue between Philip and his English lover, later identified as a model for Maria in The Counterlife. Juxtaposed with the dialogues of Philip and the English woman are Philip's dialogues with ex-patriot Czechs, former lovers, and a Polish woman on sex, infidelity, family, work, psychotherapy, politics, and English anti-Semitism. During an episode of the lovers' game called "reality shift," Roth returns to the characters of his previous fictions as Philip persuades his mistress to play the part of E. I. Lonoff's biographer, a man who wants to earn quick cash by writing a brief work on the recently deceased Zuckerman. Illustrative of the work's self-reflexive comedy is Philip's role as interviewee opposite his lover as interrogator posing questions about Zuckerman and Lonoff. Playing feminist literary critic, she assails him as a misogynist: "'Why did you portray Mrs. Portnoy as a hysterical? Why did you portray Lucy Nelson as a psychopath? Why did you portray Maureen Tarnopol as a liar and a cheat? Does this not defame and denigrate women? Why do you depict women as shrews, if not to malign them?'" (114). Deceptive in its apparent non-fiction form, Deception, is a postmodernist work about fiction, demanding of its readers complete familiarity with the Roth canon and willing engagement in the process the author earlier ridiculed.

Obsession with the authorial self and the theme of distinguishing fact from fiction takes yet a more complicated, fantastical postmodernist turn in Operation Shylock, as Roth once again devises a series of playful contradictory possibilities. He uses the devices of metafiction to examine fictional systems and the way in which reality is transformed by and filtered through narrative conventions. Having repeatedly reproved readers for confusing him with his protagonists, Roth now professes to be writing a confession, offers himself as the fictional text, and tells interviewers that the events of the novel are autobiographical. Harold Bloom aptly notes, "What fascinates about Operation Shylock, is the degree of the author's experimentation in shifting the boundaries between his life and his work"
(45). Deliberately confounding fact and fiction, multiple contradictory perspectives, reflexive playfulness, and self-conscious manipulation of reader expectations, Roth flaunts artifice and directs our attention to the hazards of interpretation. Against the backdrop of the Intifada and the Demjanjuk trial, historic events that lend an aura of authenticity to his fantasy, Roth invents a confrontation between a character named Philip Roth to whom he attributes his own books under their real titles, and an impostor calling himself Philip Roth whom the fictional Roth derisively renames Moishe Pipik. Recovering from a Halcion-induced emotional breakdown, the beleaguered novelist departs for Israel to interview Aharon Appelfeld and to confront the founder and moving force of Anti-Semites Anonymous, an anti-Zionist using Philip Roth’s name, while promoting the repatriation of Israelis of European and American origin and descent. Fantasy and humor reign as the double is doubled and double crossed when Roth impersonates Moishe Pipik and becomes an agent of Mossad, the Israeli intelligence agency.

The authorial character is dramatized in self-conflict over the possibility that the impostor is more convincing than he. In an effort at confidence-building, he tells himself, “it would be only natural to assume that in the narrative contest (in the realistic mode) ... the real writer would easily emerge as inventive champion, scoring overwhelming victories in Sophistication of Means, Subtlety of Effects, Cunningness of Structure, Ironic Complexity, Intellectual Interest, Psychological Credibility, Verbal Precision, and Overall Verisimilitude...” (OS 247). Nevertheless, the impostor triumphs by abusing every principle of realism.

The literary persona is of primary interest, especially in light of the character’s many references to contemporary writers and his own oeuvre. The fictional Roth offers views on Jewish American writing, refers to Malamud’s The Assistant, Bellow’s The Victim, and Kosinski’s The Painted Bird in a manner evocative of Philip Roth’s critical essays. Like John Barth, Roth is excessively self-referential in Operation Shylock invoking Zuckerman, Kepesh, Tarnapol, and Portnoy by name and offering direct comments on most of his fiction, once to My Life as a Man and The Great American Novel, twice to Letting Go and The Ghost Writer, thrice to Portnoy’s Complaint, and five times to the stories of Goodbye Columbus. In this self-conscious story about story-telling, Roth even includes a synopsis of Operation Shylock and analyses the Pipik plot. One of his Israeli handlers invokes the postmodernist assault on mimetic fiction in his contention that the “novelist’s imagination will come up with something far more seductive than whatever may be the ridiculous and trivial truth.... Reality. So banal, so foolish, so incoherent—such a baffling and disappointing nuisance” (OS 348). Finally, the entire epilogue is given over to discussion of the book we are reading and to Roth’s debate with the Mossad officer about printing a dis-
claiming, publishing the book as a novel rather than a confession, and deleting the Athens chapter detailing his work on "Operation Shylock," an account that indeed does not appear.

Roth astounded readers with the artifice and intellectual ingenuity of Counterlife and Operation Shylock. Those risks taken, he returned in Sabbath's Theater to a more conventional form of narrative realism and seemed to retire Nathan Zuckerman. As in the past, when readers thought they had concluded their engagement with Roth's alter ego in Zuckerman Bound only to have him resurface in The Counterlife, Zuckerman is again resurrected in American Pastoral, where once more he ruminates, in the early section of the novel, on life and art, or more precisely, the difficulty of separating truth from fiction, the artist's misunderstanding of reality and character. Zuckerman's presence is diminished in this novel depicting America of the 1960s and the collapse of an ordinary man's life. The plot is played out against the turbulent backdrop of Vietnam era political protest, and is juxtaposed with America of the forties and fifties, critical decades in the life of the nation and the principal characters.

Although intimations of self-reflexivity enter the novel briefly, they hover in the background throughout the work. Questions of the disparity between reality and the artist's perception are introduced by Zuckerman as narrator, now a sixty-two year old cancer survivor, musing on the life of a man he knew from childhood and incidentally reconsidering his own perceptions of fiction's capacity to convey truth. The observant writer realizes that "the man within the man was scarcely perceptible," (30) and he is forced to acknowledge fiction as "a dazzling illusion empty of all perception, an astonishing farce of misrepresentation" (35). Yet, as the writer struggles to penetrate the meaning of another's life, Roth again draws distinctive lines between art and life. Zuckerman observes:

The fact remains that getting people right is not what living is all about anyway. It's getting them wrong that is living, getting them wrong and wrong and wrong and then, on careful reconsideration, getting them wrong again. That's how we know we're alive: we're wrong. Maybe the best thing would be to forget being right or wrong about people and just go along for the ride (35).

But getting it right is precisely what motivates Roth as he explores a man's life from the perspective of the townspeople who think they know him and from his own perspective. After all Zuckerman's seeming disclaimers, upon further reflection Zuckerman remains the artist serving craft and truth, "The illusion that you may get it right someday is the perversity that draws you on" (63).
Debra Shostak observed of *The Counterlife*: “In textualizing the self, in seeing the self as narrative, as a discursive invention, Roth recovers metafiction from the implicit nihilism and anxiety of the postmodern de-centered or indeterminate self” (198-99). Like other postmodernists, he privileges the artist as a new type of hero and often projects the inner life of the self as the field of action. He departs from postmodernists who substitute theoretical reflection about the resources of narrative for narrative itself. Theory does not assert dominance over story and felt life, no matter how fragmented the self and how disintegrated the narrative. Roth’s self-reflexive novels suggest endless possibilities for meaningful experience and intimate that truth is composed not only of the objective reality we perceive but also the subjective reality we imagine, thereby enlarging our sense of reality by including elements ordinarily not attributed to realism.

Although American Jewish writing, notably the fiction of Singer, Bellow, Malamud, Ozick, and Roth embraces the fantastic; it is premised on the belief that art communicates significantly about the nature of humanity and the world. Despite its fashionable self-reflexivity, Roth’s fiction retains an interest in social realism, a wider concern with public events than is customarily associated with postmodern literature and it is therefore more readable. Roth’s fiction is increasingly about itself, yet it is also about life outside the text. For all their attention to artifice, Roth’s novels are also social/political commentaries intensely concerned about realities of modern urban life, the nature of Jewish identity, the Arab/Israeli political climate, and other aspects of the world outside of fiction and they address readers powerfully about political and historical reality, reconnecting readers to the world outside the text. For Roth literature is more than a self-contained narrative of signs and codes. Writing in a countercurrent to the postmodernist vogue denying the idea of meaning in life and art; that separates life and art in equally meaningless realms, Roth, like Bellow, Ozick, and Malamud, opposes the view of history as an unintelligible flux of phenomena, rejects the postmodernists’ view that efforts of the designing or ordering imagination to discover or impose meaning are absurd or fraudulent, and affirms that truth exists outside the text. Despite embracing the aesthetic that treats fiction as an artifact of its own making, Roth parts company with many postmodernists by creating fictions that are provocative commentaries on human existence.

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Works Cited


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