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**Dans Le Vrai**

**Philip Roth and the Shadows of the Real**

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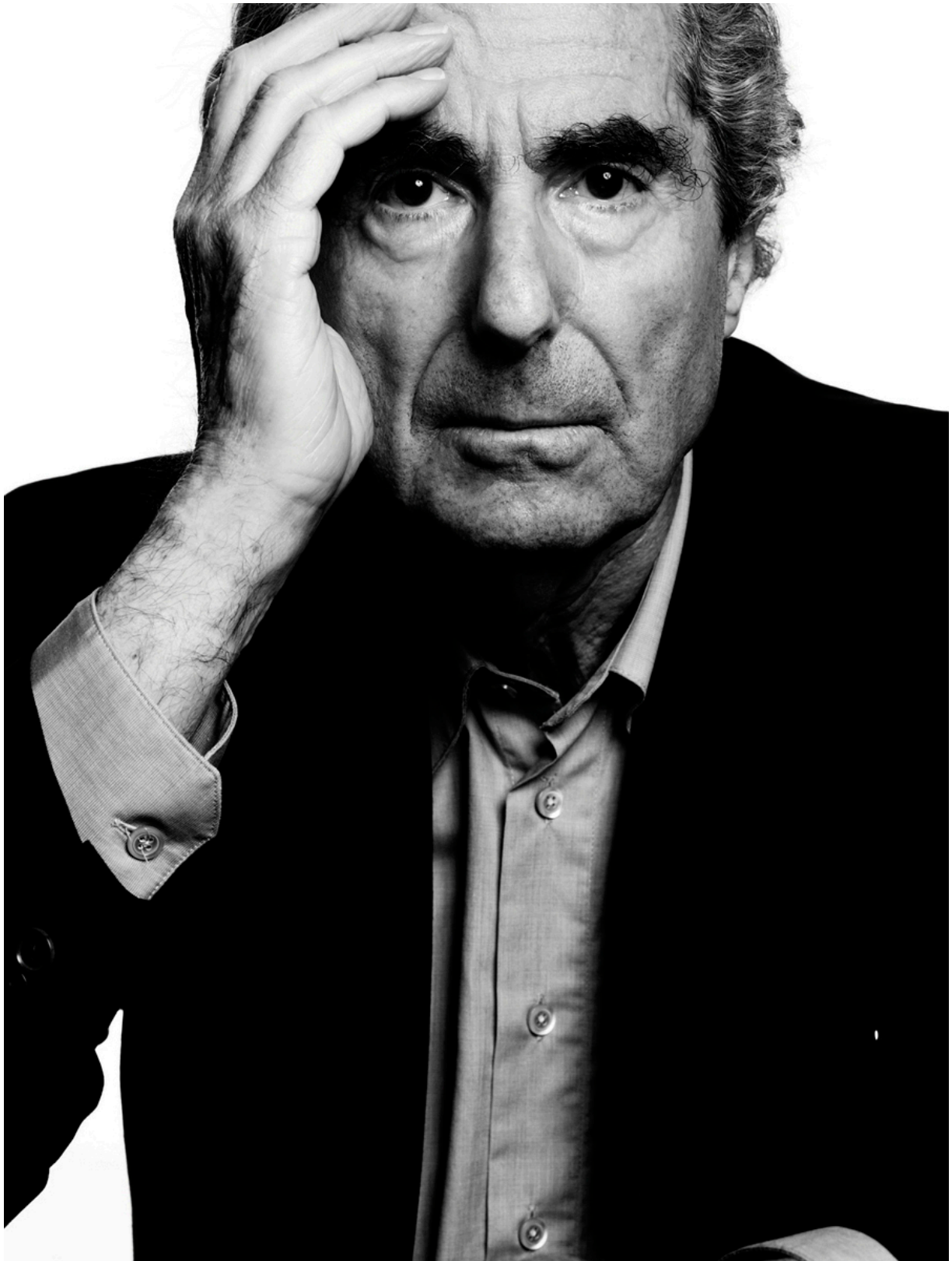
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# Dans Le Vrai

Philip Roth and  
the Shadows of the Real

Marco Lazzarin



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MACBETH:  
Life's a tale told by an idiot

— W. Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act V

And as he spoke I was thinking,  
*the kind of stories people turn life into,*  
*the kind of lives people turn stories into.*

— Nathan Zuckerman, in *The Counterlife*

Life consists  
Of propositions about life

— Wallace Stevens, “Men Made Out of Words”

The undevelopedness, the unplottedness, what  
is merely latent, that is actuality, you are right.  
Life before the narrative takes over *is* life.

—Ivan, in *Deception*.

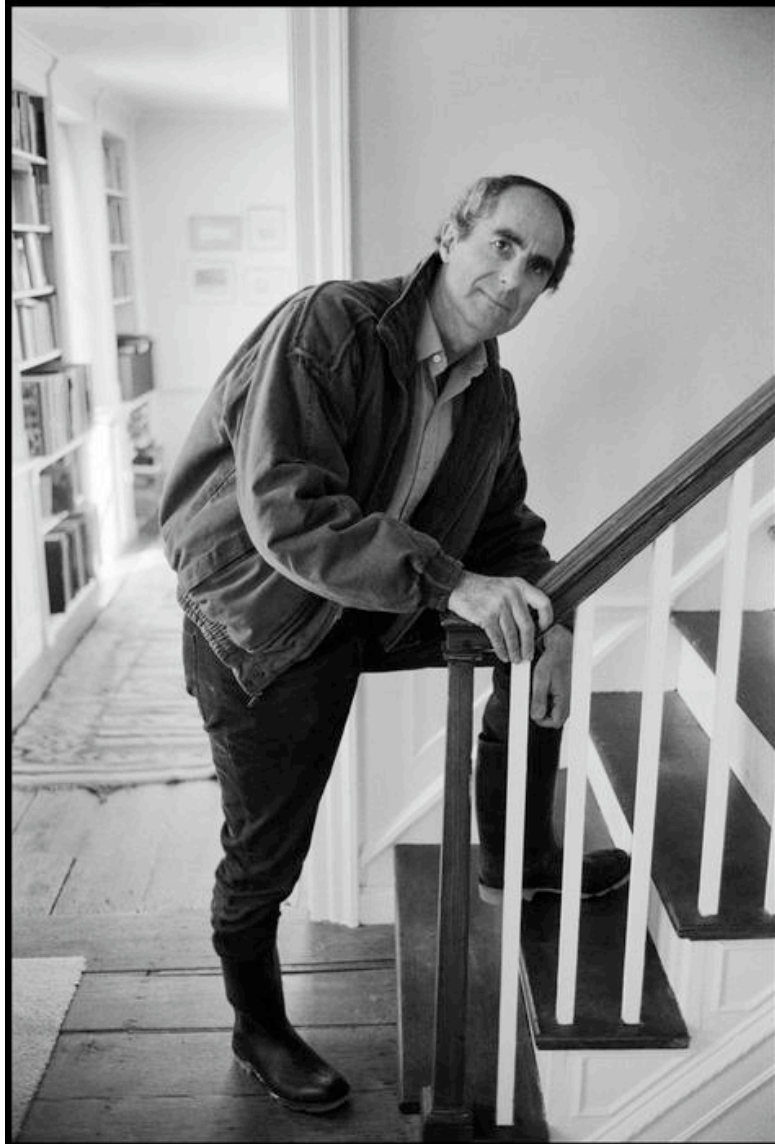
## Abbreviations

The following abbreviations appear parenthetically in the text to identify references to Roth's books and a interview series.

GW	<i>The Ghost Writer</i>	D	<i>Deception</i>	HS	<i>The Human Stain</i>
AL	<i>The Anatomy Lesson</i>	OS	<i>Operation Shylock</i>	S	<i>Shop Talk</i>
C	<i>The Counterlife</i>	AP	<i>American Pastoral</i>	PAA	<i>The Plot Against America</i>
F	<i>The Facts</i>	IMC	<i>I Married a Communist</i>	EG	<i>Exit Ghost</i>
WOS	<i>Web of Stories:Roth</i>	PRS	<i>Philip Roth Studies</i>		

*Dans Le Vrai*

*Dans Le Vrai:  
Philip Roth and the Shadows of the Real*





Introduction

MY LIFE AS A READER (OF PHILIP ROTH)

*One Long Speech I've Been Listening To*

All of us failed to match our dream of perfection.  
So I rate us on the basis of our splendid failure to  
do the impossible.

— William Faulkner, “The Art of Fiction”

When she talks to her friends about me, my mother often mentions a moment she remembers from my early childhood. She says that I used to spend entire afternoons sitting on the sofa with a children’s book in my hand, listening to a cassette with the reading of the story. I could not read yet, but I knew that I had to turn the page every time a bell rang. This is the first reading memory she

has of me. I spent my childhood and part of my adolescence either outside or with a guitar in hand, but always far from books. Only in my mid-teens did I begin to discover the pleasure of reading. The first time I decided to approach a novel was as a continuation of my musical education, a search for the roots of Bob Dylan and Tom Waits. I took months to finish Kerouac's *On the Road*, and I still remember running in the kitchen to say to my mother that I had finished it, telling her how good its final sentence was. Some months later, under the influence of a friend, I got interested in *The Lord of the Rings*, and for a couple of years I plunged in Middle Earth. Once I emerged from it, a fortuity led me to Hemingway. I read several of his major novels, and I became devoted to his short stories. I went on reading *The Great Gatsby*, and I could not wait to read *The Sound and the Fury*. When I had to decide what to study at university, it was clear that my field of choice was American literature.

While I was making my first steps in learning to read seriously and developing a critical mind-frame during my first semester at university, I came across Philip Roth's novels. Those books were a sublime teaching lesson on the power of literature. Soon he supplanted Hemingway as my chosen author, and I began reading his oeuvre, one piece after another. It took some time. While I was reading his greatest works, he was publishing one book a year, giving me another item to put in my reading list. While I read his minor works, I was enticed to return to the milestones of his career. While I read the American trilogy once again, another of his novels was on the syllabus of a course. My life as a serious reader has never been without the Bard of Newark. When the time came for me to write this work, my first book-length piece of literary criticism, the choice, quite naturally, fell on him.

My timing could not have been more apt. Around the days in which I began reading some new criticism before starting to write, Philip Roth announced his retirement. At eighty, after fifty years of uninterrupted dedication to the art of fiction, and several novels worthy of a place in the pantheon of literature, he quit. After months spent agonizing over the beginning of a new book, he realized he no longer had to do it. After rereading the works of his favorite author, he reread almost all of his own novels, and made his judgment: "At the end of his life, the boxer Joe Luis said, 'I did the best I could with what I had.' It's exactly what I would say of my work: I did the best I could with what I had" (Remnick, "Enough" nd). The fast-growing oeuvre stopped, and it was ready for assessment.

Philip Roth's career reminds the one of other age-defining artists, such as James and Conrad, Shakespeare and Dickens, Bach and Beethoven, Bob Dylan and Miles Davis: extensive and metamorphic, with a constant drive toward reinvention, one work closely tied to the previous and

the following one, while being fresh and independent. The twenty-six-year-old author of *Goodbye, Columbus* is nothing like the aging reclusive writer of *American Pastoral*, who bears little similarity to the publicly-involved often-interviewed literary megastar of the Nemeses tetralogy. Roth's novels have certainly different concentrations, various modes, diverging degrees of intensity, but everywhere in his oeuvre one can detect his stubborn determination in the merciless and shameless evisceration of his subject. The ever-present principle of Roth's fiction is the relentless depiction of reality stripped of any idealization, any illusion, any naiveté, any romanticism, any moral prescription. There is no ethical code in his representations of life: they include the ludicrous in the tragic, the disdainful in the righteous, the ambiguous in the certain. His career has been a fifty-year battle against the oversimplification of the real. He embraces reality in all its profound complexity and manifold contradictions, and his attempt lies in illuminating such neglected complexities of the real. In Leo Glucksman's writing lesson to Nathan Zuckerman in *I Married a Communist* we can find the driving impulses of Roth's literary endeavor.

As an artist the nuance is your *task*. Your task is *not* to simplify. Even should you choose to write in the simplest way, à la Hemingway, the task remains to impart the nuance, to elucidate the complication, to imply contradiction. Not to erase the contradiction, not to deny the contradiction, but to see where, within the contradiction, lies the tormented human being. To allow the chaos, to let it in. You *must* let it in. (IMC 223)

For thirty-one books, Philip Roth's scrutinizing eye looked into the twists and turns of the human existence, "making the transparent opaque, the opaque transparent, the obscure obvious, the obvious obscure" (Oates 95). Whether he dealt with the subjective identity, sexual desire, the life of the writer, Jewishness in post-war America, American history, or all of them together, one could rest assured to find his playful exuberance and his sheer intelligence, his comic freewheelingness and his tragic gravity, his seething attention to the lively detail and his recognizable keen voice. With him, one is always in for a disillusioned reality, in full bloom.

Before moving on to introduce the particular focus of my work, I feel the obligation to make some remarks on my approach to literary criticism. When I came to write about Philip Roth, I felt I could not detach myself from my individual perspective. Literary criticism, as I understand it, is "the art of making what is implicit in the text as finely explicit as possible," as Harold Bloom says ("Books" nd). I follow this dictum faithfully. However, it did not feel right for me to abide by the widespread impersonality of such art. A commentary on the text is the record of a reading experience, which I believe is inseparable from the subjective point of view. The analytical work cannot but be expressive of the individual mind in which it originates. Reading is a profoundly

personal activity, and I do not see the point in concealing the peculiar singularity of the reader. As I considered writing about the long hours spent on a chair with a Roth novel in hand, I began to see this work as the equivalent of an autobiography—a reader’s autobiography. I have decided to write the following pages in the first person singular. We live in the first person, and we read in the first person. I have not yet found a valuable reason to omit the subjectivity of the reading experience. Thus, I also took the liberty of making this work a chronicle of my peculiar experience with Roth and his books. When I read one author or the other, things happen to me: I talk with people about the books I read, I reevaluate ideas, I imagine and reimagine what I read. We read books because they have some effects on us, because they persist in our lives. The brief autobiographical anecdotes I include in these pages are supposed to remind us that the act of reading does not occur in a void. The text has meaning because it is created and consumed by human beings, each of whom is making that complicated endeavor that is living a life. Therefore, if I write about a book that I have read, I feel compelled to talk not only about the book itself, but also about the consequences that it has on me as a human being. The effects on the reader are part of the book. Reading Philip Roth’s novels has been a major event in my life, and as such I wrote about it. This is the story of my life as a reader of Philip Roth. Bear with me.

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People have been writing about books from myriad perspectives. As a consequence of the philosophical and intellectual development of the last century, readers and scholars have been using different theoretical approaches and starting points in their analyses. Over these several years of studying literature, I have been both surprised and bothered by the most various interpretations. I learned to pay immensely detailed attention to the text from the old-fashioned New Critic approach, while I still cannot restrain my repulsion toward the ludicrous articles that pretend to analyze such and such novel while they concentrate on something else entirely, whatever the theoretical perspective. Often I wonder what my theoretical approach is, without reaching a neat conclusion. I write about a profound reading experience, about what in the book bewilders and astonishes me as a man, about the truths that the novel contains. I am most interested in how the writer deals with the most basic questions about humanity, and my endeavor is to make them explicit and evident. I do

not read Roth in order to know about Newark in the 1940s, however interesting it might be; I read Roth because it says something important about what it means to live a life.

My dissertation is about how in his novels Philip Roth deals with an elemental question about existence—namely, what we take as real. In our everyday life, we are bombarded with facts and information, and we assimilate them through identifiable patterns. We claim to know what happened to our friend in this or that occasion, privately we are aware of who we are, and we affirm to know not only ourselves, but our friends, our partners, our parents, our enemies. It does not require much effort to establish the difference between what is real and what is not. Simple, isn't it?

Philip Roth teaches that “nothing, but nothing, is simple” (C 318). All we know about reality is our narrative re-elaboration of it. In other words, the means through which we understand and explain what happens to us is the form of the story. Each story we create, however, begs its questions: is it reliable? Which part of the story is emphasized and which one is minimized? What is embellished and what is omitted? Is reality as linear and clear-cut as the story conveys or is it more complicated? Is the coherence of the story genuine or fabricated? Would someone else's story about the same fact be congruent? Can we go back to the portrayed reality without the scheme provided by the story? Similar questions can be raised also about the narratives through which we make sense of people, especially ourselves: for instance, is what we say about ourselves to others meant to be emblematic, or to be accurate, or is it peculiar to a particular moment? Which is the story we tell of ourselves, who we really are or what we believe ourselves to be? And are our unwritten biographies of other people faithful to the real or are they filled with conjectures and speculations?

These are the questions that Philip Roth demands us to ask ourselves through his novels. He undermines our certainties, and prompts us to look into the mechanisms through which we construct our reality. In particular during the second half of his career, Philip Roth focused his attention on how we depend on narrative constructions for our apprehension of the real, narratives in which imagination plays a major role. In some of his greatest novels, Roth makes plain how we are able to relate to our reality exclusively through the construction of stories about the real—indeed, “we dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative” (Hardy 5). What happens to us is inseparable from its narrative reformulation. We create stories not only about events, but mostly about people: we ceaselessly rely upon the genre of the biography in order to explain a subjectivity. We perceive not only ourselves, but also others as characters in the story that is a life. When we face these narratives, however, a major problem arises. How much reality is in those stories we tell

ourselves? These accounts of the real are coherent, linear, unambiguous. Reality, however, is just the opposite: chaotic, inexplicable, contradictory. What I want to foreground in my work is how, in several of his major novels, Philip Roth implicitly argues that those stories are constructed according to their function of acting as a counterweight against life's chaos; that they depict the reality as we want to see it and not as it is; that they are imaginatively-constructed re-elaborations of the facts. Even if they tend not to contain outright inventions, those narratives present a careful selection of facts, subtle or gross distortions, various omissions and hyperboles. They maintain little of reality, and gain much from our imagination—in the end, those stories turn out to be fictions about the real. Yet those fictions are the real to us. Like the immobilized men in Plato's cave, we "hold that the truth is nothing other than the shadows of [...] things" (Plato 194). Reality is not something we can deal with directly; we can only apprehend it through its imaginative reflection on the walls of our minds. What we call reality is nothing other than the narrative shadows of the real.

Over the years of reading Philip Roth, I identified this as one of the most important threads of Roth's major phase.<sup>1</sup> Although this theme is not always developed as overtly as in *The Counterlife*, I have come to consider it the starting point for the analysis of works such as *The Facts*, *Operation Shylock* and the American trilogy. It does not only offer an explanation of the narratological complexity of these books, but it also stands at the core of Roth's epistemological journey into the entrails of the human experience.

My first step is to delineate the trajectory that permitted Roth to arrive to the masterpieces about the imaginative absorption of the real in narrative form, such as *The Counterlife* and *The Human Stain*. In "Counterauthors," I trace this interest in Philip Roth's fiction through his use of the writer-protagonists: Peter Tarnopol, Nathan Zuckerman, and "Philip Roth." I demonstrate how it is through a profound meditation about the relationship between the novelist and reality in *My Life as a Man* and *Zuckerman Bound* that he arrives to abandon the novelist's craving for the real as the ultimate source of the original and the interesting in *The Counterlife*, and to embrace reality as a multimorphic universe defined by the imaginative and narrative element of the human character. In this way, Roth begins comprehending and investigating the analogies that exist between writing and living: since reality as we perceive it consists in the stories we create about it, the endeavor of every human being in fabricating those imaginatively-enhanced coherent narratives about incongruent events and people—Roth shows—is in many ways congruent to the professional endeavor of the fiction writer. In order to illustrate this, I devote some extra attention to Philip Roth's

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<sup>1</sup> Scholars and journalists have divided Roth's career in many ways. When I refer to his major phase I include the years that go from the publication of *The Counterlife* to the publication of *The Human Stain*.

autobiography, *The Facts*. I follow this thematic trajectory through the rest of his career, through the American trilogy and his late works such as *Exit Ghost*, and conclude with the post-it on Roth's computer monitor that reminds him of his decision to retire.

After this first chapter, my work focuses on two specific areas in which the narrative construction of the real is constantly at work in our everyday life, two specific areas that Philip Roth explores in some of his greatest novels—the self and the other.

The first pages of the second chapter, “Improvisations on a Self,” explain how Roth developed a conception of self different from the commonly assumed one. The self according to Roth becomes a fluid entity at whose center there is the human capacity to impersonate, otherwise there is no stable essence that identifies the self—for Roth, there is no self as we ordinarily intend it. Existence becomes a long performance in which we act the characters we imagine ourselves to be. The idea is condensed in a sentence in *The Counterlife*: “It's *all* impersonation—in the absence of a self, one impersonates selves, and after a while impersonates the best self that best gets one through” (C 320). In life as in Roth's fiction, we make sense of our protean subjectivity with the construction of the narrative of the self. In fact, we perceive ourselves as the main character in our own biography, a biography whose coherence is a product of our imagination. In order to make this clear, I draw from philosophy and sociolinguistics. This idea of the self is the starting point for my analysis of both *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock*.

I deal with the narrative assimilation of other people in the third chapter, “The Bankruptcy of ‘the Business of Other People.’” In the late 1990s, after a couple of decades dedicated to the mystery of the subjectivity, Philip Roth directs his attention to how we relate to the other. In the American trilogy, Roth returns to Nathan Zuckerman, who, living alone in the woods, spends his time writing about men enmeshed in the “American berserk” (AP 86). Through Zuckerman, Roth continues his investigation of how we make sense of reality through stories and reinforces the similarities between writing and living in *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, and *The Human Stain*. The question here is epistemological: how can we apprehend somebody else? Roth argues that we simply cannot—the comprehension of another human being evades us always. The only means we have to make the other identifiable to ourselves is to contrive a coherent biography, imaginatively compensating for our ineluctable ignorance of the events and their consequences—in other words, we create a semi-fictional story that makes the other intelligible. This is what Zuckerman does with the heroes of *American Pastoral* and *The Human Stain*. In my textual analysis of these two novels, I try to make explicit how Zuckerman's endeavor as a fiction writer to

illuminate the lives of Seymour Levov and Coleman Silk is not only at the foundation of those two remarkable novels, but also crucial to understand their narratological complexity.

I conclude with a praise of Roth's fifty-year long effort in bringing to light our existential complexity and ambiguity. Philip Roth demands his readers to act counter the persistent banalization of everything and the daily dependence on stereotypes and clichés, and to see reality in all its chaotic turbulence, and existence in all its possible variations, and cognition in all its imaginative force. By instilling a doubt on the veracity of what we are reading in novels such as *The Counterlife*, *Operation Shylock*, *American Pastoral*, and *The Human Stain*, the Bard of Newark makes his reader doubt his own certainties, reconsider what he believes to be the truth, ponder the questions from another perspective.<sup>2</sup> I believe this is what great literature is supposed to do, and Philip Roth has by now demonstrated to have been one of the greatest craftsmen of the art of fiction. With this praise, I also conclude a fragmentary account of that splendid experience that has been reading and rereading the novels of Philip Roth.

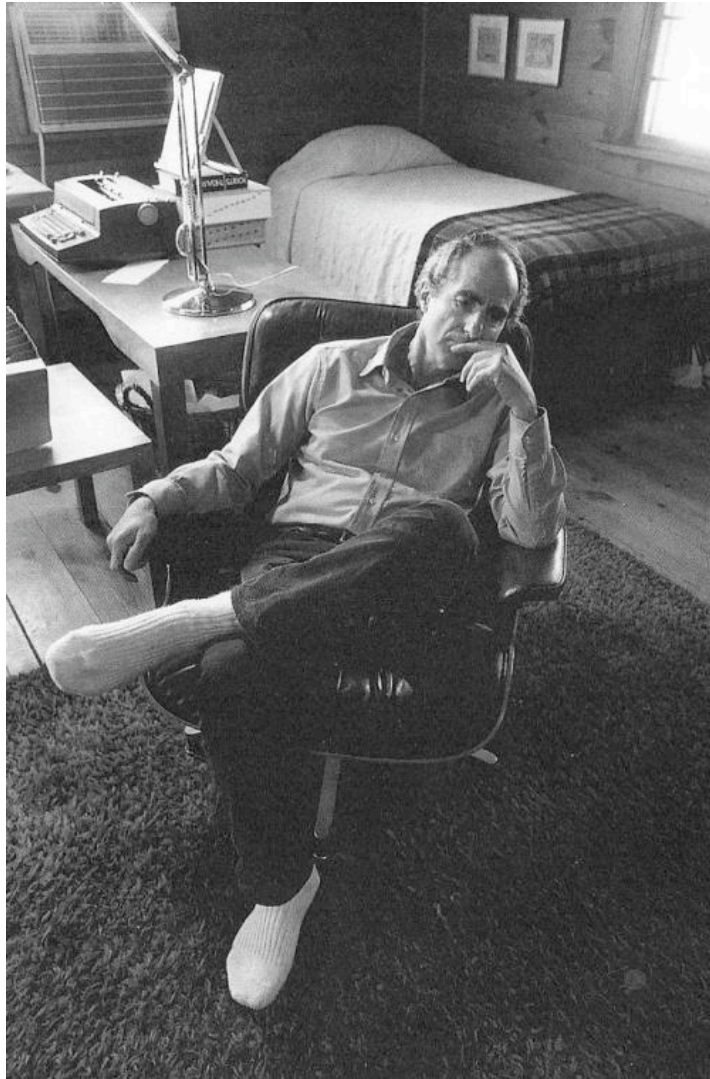
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“Writing is *le vrai* for me. That’s what I conclude! My nostalgia for *le vrai* is an illusion,” Roth writes in his notes for what was to become *The Facts* (qtd. Shostak, *Countertexts* 267). For most of us, this statement is far from valid. We do not spend day after day at our desk, pounding our keyboards for hours in the attempt to write. And yet, storytelling is *le vrai* for us as well. What we take as real is a version of the real. Stories are *le vrai* for us all. Indeed, we are all authors of our lives, authors of ourselves and authors of the people we come in contact with. As Ross Posnock wrote, “we have to live with our accounts of the real and with their inevitable frailty” (135). In my meager experience, I have not yet found another work of art or of science that makes such a profound inquiry on our narrative cognition of our reality as the novels of Philip Roth. This is my mission in the following one-hundred-odd pages: make explicit how in life as well as in Philip Roth’s novels it is only in our stories about the real that we are *dans le vrai*.

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<sup>2</sup> I am well aware that, with non-gender-specific singular nouns such as “reader” or “author”, the correct pronoun is “his or her” or “their.” However, I find them linguistically obtrusive or bothersome in some occasions, such as the repeated reference to a singular noun using the plural pronoun. Since I am a male, in this work I will use the masculine pronoun when it comes to non-gender-specific nouns such as reader, human being, and author. If this text were written by a woman, I would welcome full-heartedly the female pronoun in such situations.





## COUNTERAUTHORS

*We Are All Each Other's Authors*

PROSPERO:

We are such stuff

As dreams are made on.

— *The Tempest*, William Shakespeare

Luck led me to Philip Roth. Buying the Italian edition of *The Human Stain* was a happy accident, the result of browsing at a local bookstore in a rainy afternoon in early 2006, and liking the name of Zuckerman on several back covers of Roth's books. Without doubts, Zuckerman's profession, the same I aspired to, was another allurements. Does not any would-be writer have the compulsion to

read books about writers? But why Roth rather than someone else, I have no idea. I read *La macchina umana* in the summer, and I felt it was complex, and with an unusual ending, but beautiful. I did not think it was the best I had ever read, for sure, but a sensation of having lost much of the book's meaning persisted. The following fall, during my first course at university, a professor taught me how to read seriously analyzing incipits of American masterpieces, from Hawthorne to Roth. How could I not show off my antecedent knowledge of the author, when we talked of the first paragraph of *American Pastoral*? "It's probably Zuckerman," I said, as the class was commenting on the narrator. The professor offered me a smile that revealed her surprise at my right guess. Some days later I went to the professor's office, and, of course, I asked her to read my stories. The following week I went back so as to talk about them: the hatchet job was dutiful and so was the lesson on *le mot juste*. Then, she asked me what I liked to read. Leaving out my extensive knowledge of Middle-Earth, I told her about my love for Hemingway's stories, *The Great Gatsby*, and I added that I also liked Philip Roth. "What have you read by Roth?" she asked. *The Human Stain*. "Read *American Pastoral*. Then come back and we'll talk about it." I did and I went back. I enjoyed it much more than *The Human Stain*, and I felt ready to talk about it. I was getting good at reading, therefore I did not expect missing an enormous portion of what the book was about. When my professor explained to me how after the high school reunion the story is Zuckerman's fabrication about the Swede, and how something similar happens in the major part of *The Human Stain*, I was dumbstruck. Not so much because of my inability to get it—after all, my professor said, I was not the first who did not notice it—but because learning that the Levovs, the Silks, the Farleys were characters in Zuckerman's pages, the creations of a writer, gave to those books another dimension, another meaning, another power. Something that I had never encountered anywhere else. No sooner had I gone home than I was on *American Pastoral*, page 89, reading and rereading that smooth transition from life to fiction.

Now, after having read and reread the majority of the Roth corpus, it seems that particularly in the stretch of Roth's career spanning from 1986 (*The Counterlife*) to 2000 (*The Human Stain*)—the period any serious reader would define as his greatest phase—Roth is profoundly interested in writing about the ways in which life and fiction collide, about how they influence, imitate, and complete each other, about how they are profoundly entwined and functional to one another, about how the process of living and the process of writing fictions is in many ways analogous. More than Jewishness, celebrity, sex, himself, or even mortality, this is the great (silenced) subject of Roth's

fiction.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, my profound admiration for Roth's dissection of life's mechanism is what made these questions my subject. And made the proper presentation of these questions my problem to solve.<sup>4</sup>

A preferential perspective on Roth's approach to these questions is achieved by looking at his counterauthors. Following, as I will do in the next pages, the evolution of these characters, one can trace a well-defined thematic trajectory that runs through most of Roth's career: it began with Peter Tarnopol in the 1970s, is developed fully with the emergence of Nathan Zuckerman, and challenged by "Philip Roth."<sup>5</sup> The link between the intellectual problems assigned to these character and their profession is fundamental. Whereas making Tarnopol a writer might have begun as the need of having "something solid under [Roth's] feet to kick off [his] imagination" (Lee 225), it became a crucial point in the thematic problems that Roth's profession poses. Having a writer as a central character, narrator, and often the author of the book we are reading itself helps Roth dramatize the ambiguous relationship between life and fiction. This happens because the problematization of this relationship is the writer's job, because the writer makes a living of the "obsessive reinvention of the real" (C 247). With a writer as protagonist, the reality is intensified and enlarged: it becomes filled with the uncountable variations to such reality that the writer can look into in his fiction; the lives becomes pregnant with all the un-lived counterlives; the reality is charged with all the potential fictional amplification. The writer becomes a special inquisitor of reality since he makes a living performing professionally a human activity that we all do every day: the narrative reinterpretation of the real. Yet, whereas we forget that we do this every day, the writer is persistently conscious of this constant re-examination of existence. In fact, to the writer, it becomes essential. In *Exit Ghost* (2007), an old Zuckerman, after having written a long scene for the playlet *He and She* in which he relives his impossible desire for Jamie Logan, says:

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<sup>3</sup> In occasion of Roth's eightieth birthday, *New York* magazine published a poll on Roth's career done among thirty "notable" writers. When asked what his great subject is, the answers were: Jewishness, 14%; celebrity, 7%; mortality, 21%; sex, 14%; himself, 43%. By the results, Roth's immense effort in convincing his readers that he was not writing about himself either with Zuckerman or with "Roth" was largely unsuccessful. That poll as well as the myriad articles on Roth published around the same time showed that the Roth stereotypes remain rooted among his readers, and, as a consequence, in the press. For instance, the "notable" readers of the poll, when asked about Roth's misogyny, they answered: Yes, 17%; No, 30%; Well..., 52%. All those who did not say no should have listened to Claudia Roth Pierpont at Roth's 2013 birthday ceremony.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. p. 103.

<sup>5</sup> The inverted commas is the way that I will use to indicate the fictional character who bears the same name and biography of his author. In this case the Philip Roth who is a character in *Operation Shylock* or *Deception* cannot be considered the same of the real Philip Roth who wrote those books. To mark the difference I will use the inverted commas for the fictional representations.

But isn't one pain quotient shocking enough without fictional amplification, without giving things an intensity that is ephemeral in life and sometimes even unseen? Not for some. For some very, very few that amplification, evolving uncertainly out of nothing, constitutes their only assurance, and the un-lived, the surmise, fully drawn in print on paper, is the life whose meaning comes to matter the most. (EG 147)

The writer is a preferential subject, and Roth noticed this early on. Through the writer, he is able to examine the mechanisms through which we distort the factual through our imagination, which is how we deal with life. Using a professional reveler in the possibilities of life, Roth manages to tell us something fundamental about who we are.

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We come across Roth's first counterauthor, Peter Tarnopol, in *My Life as a Man*, published in 1974. In Roth's oeuvre, this novel marks the transition from the period dictated by the use and reuse of the sheer comedy of Alexander Portnoy<sup>6</sup> to the serious tragicomedy of the Zuckerman period, a transition from a more traditional representational mode to a more experimental form. The composition of *My Life as a Man* became an ordeal. Roth "was being driven quite crazy by" it: he began working on first drafts as early as 1964, but after the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint* Roth put much more effort in it (Lee 224).<sup>7</sup> When he could not overcome the problems of this novel, he set it aside to write more playful books. What came out of this effort, however, would determine Roth's career.

This novel, in fact, is a fundamental passage in Roth's career. Simply stated, *My Life as a Man* revolves around Peter Tarnopol, a young author, who attempts to make sense of his disastrous

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<sup>6</sup> The character of Alexander Portnoy is the trademark of a whole series of books, and not only *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969). When, in 1984, Roth was asked why he never reused Alexander Portnoy like he did with Kepesh and Zuckerman, he replied: "But I did use Portnoy in another book. *Our Gang* and *The Great American Novel* are Portnoy in another book. Portnoy wasn't a character for me, he was an explosion and I wasn't finished exploding after *Portnoy's Complaint*" (Lee 220).

<sup>7</sup> The compositional history of *My Life as a Man* is not simple. In 1974 he said to Joyce Carol Oates that that was a "book I'd been writing, abandoning, and returning to ever since I published *Portnoy's Complaint*" (Oates 99), while, in 1984, he said to Hermione Lee that "in a way I had been writing that book on and off since 1964" (Lee 224). The earliest manuscript of that novel in the Philip Roth papers at the Library of Congress is dated "1968. Nov. 28" (Library of Congress 35), although we have a draft of a work that led to it in 1966 (Library of Congress 36). From what we learn in *The Facts*, it is clear that in the 1960s Roth was attempting to find the right place for the events of his troubled first marriage in *When She Was Good*. The most probable scenario is that Roth began thinking about a book about his marriage in the mid-sixties, which began to take a decent form only after the completion of *Portnoy's Complaint*.

marriage through fictions and autobiography. Here Roth anticipates most of the themes that would become central in a later stage: the fictional element in our understanding of experience, the chimeric understanding of experience opposed to the human need for such understanding, the problems inherent to its narrativization, the persistence of a subject through this same narrativization.<sup>8</sup> This development marks a thematic transition in Roth, and opens up the immense opportunities tied to having a writer as vehicle for the anatomization of reality. After *My Life as a Man*, Roth's career does not turn back to what was central before. These questions, as we will see, persist in Roth's interests and come back with a vengeance particularly since 1986. All that happens in *The Counterlife*, *The Facts*, *Operation Shylock*, and the American Trilogy was born in the painful labor that produces *My Life as a Man*. Roth does not return to Tarnopol, however. He creates other counterauthors in order to address these issues.

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Nathan Zuckerman has a special place in my life. Not only is he the first character that I came across in the first Roth novel I read, but also the one I most often return to. He has become a recognizable voice that, by now, is like an old friend's, and a profoundly intelligent one. I have the impression that, among the readers of all the nine Zuckerman books, such feeling may be common. As a matter of fact, one follows him throughout his life: from his youth, through his maturity as a man and as a writer, and to his old age. One witnesses his life step by step, and it is easy to get accustomed to his presence in one's life—at least, this is what happened to me. Indeed, he is a literary character, hence he does not exist; however, my exposure to the fictional man's interiority created in me an attachment that is not fictional.<sup>9</sup> In that character, I keep finding something that always speaks to me. In Zuckerman, there is Roth in his prime.

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<sup>8</sup> At this point, I need to specify what I intend when I use phrases such as narrative unity, narrative framework, and narrativization. With narrative unity, I refer to the wholeness that a narrative gives to experience, which is intrinsically fragmentary. The cause-effect relations that a narrative is based on cause the formation of an artificial and unifying connectedness. Such is the narrative unity. With narrative framework, I refer to the structure that a narrative gives to the structureless events portrayed. Narrativization is a vexed term, and source of debate. When I talk of narrativization, I refer to the process of translating experience into narrative form. For a discussion of this term, I refer back to Monica Fludernik's *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology*.

<sup>9</sup> As Blakey Vermeule explains in *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?*, the suspension of disbelief leads us to read those characters as if they were real people. As long as we are immersed in a book, those characters are real to us: we invest emotionally in their stories as though they were someone close to us—in those hours we spend reading, we actually care about what happens to them, we struggle and suffer and rejoice with them.

Not only is Zuckerman the counterauthor who mostly resembles Roth—age, profession, provenance, and many experiences are almost identical—but he is also the one who remained closest to the author over the years. In fact, between 1979 and 2007 Roth recurred to him ten times,<sup>10</sup> making him by far his most productive one. To Roth, Nathan Zuckerman became an imaginative powerhouse that offered him countless possibilities, and immense energy; this character gave him a solid but dynamic ground in which he could explore the multifaceted human condition. Rather than being a subject in itself, Zuckerman is the way through which Roth can explore a subject, often a subject steeped in Roth's own biography. As a matter of fact, Roth often called him an "intelligence" rather than a character (WOS 21). But the best definition of this character's power for Roth comes from Zuckerman himself. In the concluding letter of *The Facts*, as he complains about the inhibition of Roth's autobiography, he says to him that he is his "medium for the really merciless self-evisceration, [his] medium for genuine self-confrontation," that "someone through whom you can detach yourself from your biography at the same time that you exploit its crises, themes, tensions, and surprises" (F 453, 434). Zuckerman gave Roth the freedom from reality, the freedom to let the imagination spin, the freedom to be irreverent and unashamed—all that Roth is not in *The Facts*—while remaining grounded in a firm, recognizable reality: "I am your permission, your indiscretion, the key to disclosure," says Zuckerman to Roth (F 434).

After *My Life as a Man*, Roth published a quartet of novels—collected as *Zuckerman Bound* since 1985—in which he traces Zuckerman's maturation from the young writer's imaginative audacity of *The Ghost Writer* (1979), through the comic misadventures with celebrity in *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981), to the tragicomedy of the mature writer torn to pieces by physical pain in *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), concluding with an "The Aspern Papers"-esque attempted smuggling of an unknown literary masterpiece from Communist Prague in *The Prague Orgy* (1985). Zuckerman is at the center of the action, the first person of interest, the all-absorbing power of the novels. He sees the reality that surrounds him with the deforming lenses of the writer, interpreting reality through its fictional potential, so much so that, in *The Anatomy Lesson*, confronted with the hard life of his Polish lover, Jaga, Zuckerman says, "monstrous that all the world's suffering is good to me inasmuch as it's grist to my mill—that all I can do, when confronted with anyone's story, is to wish to turn it into *material*, but if that's the way one is possessed, that is the way one is possessed" (AL 348). However, the concerns that emerged in *My Life as a Man* by making his character a writer are

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<sup>10</sup> Besides the canonical Zuckerman books, his appearance in *The Facts* is of paramount importance not only in the book, but in the definition of the relationship between the character and his creator.

marginal in these four novels. Despite the importance of his profession, the focus of *Zuckerman Bound* is largely Zuckerman, the man who is also a writer.

*The Ghost Writer*, however, anticipates Roth's use of Zuckerman's writerly intelligence. In the chapter "Femme Fatal," Nathan imagines Amy Bellette, a young woman staying at E.I. Lonoff's house, as a survivor of Anne Frank, emigrated to America after the war, who deals privately with the momentous publication of her diary. Here Roth exposes Zuckerman's writing process: the departure from the factual reality in order to create a more compelling fictional reality through imagination. The detachment from reality permits the admission of the unacceptable, of the unreal, of the unsaid in fiction, permits the exploration of reality without being restrained. In that reality, the writer is the cruel despot, is "a barbaric god who revels in human sacrifice" (Sartre 454). However, the fictional realm where Anne Frank is alive does not beat the unexpected wonders of reality. After he has overheard a sexually tense conversation between Amy and Lonoff, Zuckerman says, "if only I could imagine the scene I'd overheard! If only I could invent as presumptuously as real life! If one day I could just *approach* the originality and excitement of what actually goes on!" (GW 78). Reality remains a greater source for fiction than imagination. The unexpected twists and turns of real life are unmatched by our capacity to invent. This remains true throughout *Zuckerman Bound*. Things change in the books that follow this quartet.

In 1986, Roth publishes *The Counterlife*. In an interview for that book, Roth said, "I wanted to see what the intelligence I call Zuckerman could yield up unencumbered by the ordeal of his own development. The trilogy *Zuckerman Bound* is very much about the development of a man whose life consists of fictionalizing life. In this book, that man exists fully. He and his fictionalizing mind have *become*" (Rothstein "World" 198). Zuckerman is no longer a mere actor in the drama of the book; instead, he is the creator of its very universe, and he is the one with ultimate control. This novel, a watershed moment in Roth's career, is a matryoshka of fictions about the need of reinventing one's life; or, in James Wood's elegant wording, a novel that "takes what it need from postmodern self-consciousness and fictive games, and mounts a moving inquiry into what it means to lead a life" (nd).

With a book not *about* a writer, but *by* a writer, with a book that consists of the unlived possibilities of being someone else, Roth creates an environment in which the thematic trajectories anticipated in *My Life as a Man* can be explored with greater energy, and in greater depth. Starting with *The Counterlife*, Roth launches into an inquiry into the invention inherent in the act of being alive that goes on for several books. This book becomes the perfect stage for the investigation of the analogies between inventing a life and leading a life. The impersonation process is exposed in its



mundane reality. Roth shows how the act of comprehending ourselves and others is a narrative act not only for the writer, but for any human being. The writer is a special subject, however, since such activity is his profession. Roth through Zuckerman unveils the fictional element intrinsic in leading a life, the concrete reality of our imagination. “The treacherous imagination is everybody’s maker—we are all invention of each other, everybody a conjuration conjuring up everyone else. We are all each other’s authors,” Zuckerman writes in an unsent letter to his brother (C 145). Those multiple versions, subtly or flagrantly fictitious, that we have of ourselves and of others, our lives and our counterlives, and the interplay among them, are the closest we can get to the *vrai*.

*The Counterlife* is only the first step in Roth’s long journey into the tradition that investigates how imagination determines our perception of reality, how our life consists in a creative endeavor, a tradition that is not the one of postmodernism,<sup>11</sup> but the one that started with *Don Quixote* and began to live fully with Henry James, Wallace Stevens, and other modernists. *The Counterlife* is an example of such fictions that look into the meaning of being alive in this world.

In this journey, Zuckerman will remain, in Roth’s cast of characters, the privileged one in dealing with our very own “obsessive reinvention of the real [that] never stops” (C 247). In the Zuckerman novels that follows *The Counterlife*—that is, the American Trilogy and *Exit Ghost*—Zuckerman returns to illustrate the artifice of understanding experience. But until then another character captures Roth’s attention, and his birth is not pleasant.

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Following the publication of *The Counterlife*, Roth went through one of the roughest periods of his life. A botched knee surgery led Roth to use Halcion, a sleeping pill. Unfortunately, he experienced some side effects, that is to say, “an extreme depression that carried me right to the edge of emotional and mental dissolution” (F 310). During the spring and summer of 1987—while I was spending my last months in my mother’s uterus, and the first ones in the world—Roth was in his pastoral home in Connecticut disintegrating. In *Operation Shylock*, which bears a vivid description

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<sup>11</sup> While *The Counterlife*’s existential approach and innovative structure led a multitude of critics to interpret it through the lens of postmodern theory, Roth stubbornly refused this critical slant, foregrounding the mimetic aspect of his exploration of the inherent artifice of reality. Also Ross Posnock highlights the defect of such critiques: “This deconstructive critique regards ‘the real’ as simply a linguistic effect—in narrative, language is all that happens, as Roland Barthes once said. In contrast, for Roth invention is all that happens; apart from ‘the things we cannot possibly not know,’ the real is available to us as social conventions, hence plastic and revisable (James, *European* 1063)”. (135)

of this period, Roth writes, “this mental coming apart was as distinctly physical a reality as a tooth being pulled, and the agony of it was excruciating” (12). Although, once the problem had been detected, his recovery was relatively fast,<sup>12</sup> those months, he said, had “carried me a very long way from the author that I was accustomed to think of as myself” (Brent 232). It was in the period of recovery that he started looking for his lost self through writing:

I began, quite involuntarily, to focus virtually all my waking attention on worlds from which I had lived at a distance for decades—remembering where I had started out from and how it had all begun. If you lose something, you say, “Okay, let’s retrace the steps. I came in the house, took off my coat, went into the kitchen,” etc., etc. In order to recover what I had lost I had to go back to the moment of origin. I found no one moment of origin but a series of moments, a history of multiple origins, and that’s what I have written here in the effort to repossess life. (F 310)

*The Facts: A Novelist’s Autobiography*, published in early 1988, is the result of this return to the origin, and it tells the story of Roth’s repossession of the author he once was through the recollection of the seminal moments of his writing career until the publication of *Portony’s Complaint*, the 1969 novel with which Roth felt he found his voice. The book<sup>13</sup> takes the dialogic form of a reviewing process between authors: in the opening letter Roth asks Zuckerman to comment on the manuscript of his autobiography, which follows, constituting the main bulk of the book. At the end, we have a twenty-eight-page letter in which Zuckerman, and his wife, Maria, reply. These letters are the deterrent from discarding the book as a memoir for Roth aficionados.

Although it is far from being credited among Roth’s best works, *The Facts* becomes very interesting not only for the biographical information, but also because of the aesthetic terms in which Roth handles the autobiographical motif. This work continues another theme anticipated in *My Life as a Man*, that is, the narrativization of experience as a sense-making effort, and the notable problems congenial to the endeavor; or, in Zuckerman’s words, “the relationship between what happens in a life and what happens when you write about it—how close to life it is and how far from life it sometimes is” (F 436). At the same time, this question gains even greater resonance and importance, both here and even more so in *Patrimony*, because the narrativization process elevates itself to a rebuttal of mortality. Despite the problematic enterprise of applying the form of a story to experience, which remains a central concern in these books, the immortalization of such experience on paper acquires life-affirming quality. The miracle of elaborating life through language—and its

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. *Operation Shylock*: “Despite the speed with which I recovered my mental, then my emotional equilibrium and looked to be ordering daily life as competently as I ever had before...” (12).

<sup>13</sup> Both novel and autobiography are biased words in this context, therefore inappropriate.

material impression on paper—allows us to transcend the ineluctable ending of every human body, making us endure death and oblivion. While he calls attention to the perseverance of the represented subject through writing, Roth also dissects the selective process and the deforming forces intrinsic to the composition of a sense-making narrative about the real.

*The Facts* originated as a typical therapeutical memoir. In particular, in the main bulk of the book Roth seeks to come in contact with his professional genesis, by recalling the moments—his childhood, college, his destructive first marriage, the Jewish rebuke at Yeshiva University, his first wife’s death during the composition of *Portony’s Complaint*—that are narratively crucial to the writer he has become. These five central chapters seem to run in the direction opposite *The Counterlife*. In the closing pages of the latter, Zuckerman writes to Maria that

all I can tell you with certainty is that I, for one, have no self, and that I am willing or unable to perpetrate upon myself the joke of a self. It certainly does strike me as a joke about *my* self. [...] I certainly have no self independent of my imposturing, artistic efforts to have one. Nor would I want one. I am a theater and nothing more than a theater. (C 320-1)

The manuscript Roth sends to Zuckerman presents a Philip Roth recreating the image of a coherent self, looking for the “congruity between your self-consciousness and your natural being” that is at the heart of the “whole Western idea of mental health” (C 320), which is what Zuckerman disassembles in the previous book. If *The Counterlife* is about a fluid self, the manuscript at the heart of *The Facts* is about bringing back to life the lost self, solid and recognizable, even though artificial.

After Roth’s hundred-twenty-five-page “effort to repossess my life” (Weber 221), Zuckerman offers his response. In that response, he exposes our dependency on manipulative narrative structures to perceive ourselves as well as others. While Roth may have tried to present the events faithfully and accurately during the composition of the five sketches that make up the manuscript, with his letter, Zuckerman—that is to say, that part of Roth’s personality that the mask of Zuckerman represents—dismantles the structure of Roth’s self-presentation, discloses how Roth’s autobiography is another of his impersonations, another of his counterlives, another example of “*the kind of stories that people turn life into, the kind of lives that people turn stories into*” (C 111).<sup>14</sup> Zuckerman does not claim that what Roth writes about himself is complete fiction, but that the account of his life is so manipulated, so discreet, so unlike Roth’s fiction, that it might as well be.

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<sup>14</sup> Needless to say, it is highly significant that Roth chose this quote to be the epigraph for his autobiography. Such statement at the beginning cannot but undermine that authenticity naively expected from autobiographies; it hints at the doubt that Zuckerman casts fully in his closing letter.

In a way we always tell in order also not to tell, but the personal historian is expected to resist to the utmost the ordinary impulse to falsify, distort, and deny. Is this really “you” or is it what you want to look like to your readers at the age of fifty-five? You tell me in your letter that the book feels like the first thing you have ever written “unconsciously.” Do you mean that *The Facts* is an unconscious work of fiction? Are you not aware yourself of its fiction-making tricks? Think of the exclusions, the selective nature of it, the very pose of fact-facer. Is all this manipulation truly unconscious or is it pretending to be unconscious? (F 436).

Although Roth vouches for the authenticity of the events of the book,<sup>15</sup> and, at the same time, “one shouldn’t accept what Zuckerman says at face value,” Nathan’s and Maria’s critiques of the manuscript, their challenge of the surprisingly logic and coherent whole that is Roth’s self-portrait, their doubts on the proposed interpretation of events, their questions about the unsaid, are insightful, intelligent, and to the point (Rothstein “Facts” 227). The portrait of Philip Roth we get in the central manuscript is grossly incomplete and highly manipulated: “with autobiography there’s always another text, a countertext, if you will, to the one presented. It’s probably the most manipulative of all literary forms” (F 443). Who could contradict Zuckerman when he laments the absence of Roth, the bad guy, the author of *Portnoy’s Complaint*, and, I add, *Sabbath’s Theater*?

Zuckerman saves *The Facts*. It is only because of his presence, and the simultaneous coexistence of the author and the counterauthor that *The Facts* becomes Roth’s authentic autobiography. In order to do this, however, the author had to go beyond the limits of the genre. A univocal and consistent story of the self is simply unacceptable for Roth. This is why Zuckerman’s thirty-page commentary is fundamental: it counterbalances the narrative of the five central chapters, and undermines it. And yet, what is Nathan Zuckerman if not another aspect of the man Philip Roth is, a counterself? In other words, *The Facts* consists in a debate within Philip Roth about his own subjectivity. It is only in this dialogue with his alter-ego that the author manages to convey a truthful portrait of himself.

In this way, *The Facts* also comes full circle with the thematic trajectory began with *The Counterlife*. However useful this book might have been for Roth’s personal recovery, Zuckerman cannot avoid revealing the artifice at the foundation of the coherent picture that Roth wants to convey of himself, and the fundamental insufficiency of the genre memoir in making justice to the represented subject. First, criticizing Roth’s self-presentation, Zuckerman dismantles the unity of Roth’s portrait: he makes us see that Roth, the character of *The Facts*, is nothing but an impersonation of Roth; he makes us see that, here too, “it’s *all* impersonation—in the absence of a

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<sup>15</sup> “Well, there are all sorts of facts, aren’t there? This is a particular set of facts whose accuracy I will vouch for,” Roth says. (Brent 230)

self, one impersonates self, and after a while impersonates best the self that best gets one through” (C 320). Indeed, what Philip Roth does in this autobiography is what we all do in our lives: he creates the character that best fits the purpose of the narrative that is his life. Thus, Roth, via Zuckerman, returns to the same conception of self of the last pages of *The Counterlife*, to the fluid self whose representation is perennially incomplete. Second, Zuckerman dismantles the form of autobiography, making evident the artifice we impose on experience in our attempts to representation, laying bare the limits and distortions that are at work not only in that genre, but in all sorts of self-presentation. With the apposition of that letter, with the acknowledgement of the artificial coherence and the deforming factors, *The Facts* ceases to be an autobiography, and becomes a book that wants to “dramatize the doubt” —of the “uncertainty of my [Roth’s] perception” (Rothstein “Facts” 228). Having Zuckerman offer a counterweight to Roth’s impersonation of Philip the nice-guy, Roth does something, in his words, “similar to what I did in *The Counterlife*—doubt is cast on what came before. This is a counterbook—it’s my counterlife” (Rothstein “Facts” 228). In this way, *The Facts* resumes *The Counterlife*’s inquiry into the ways into which perception is a narrative endeavor based on imagination and manipulation, but with a novel focus on the problems of our attempts to give narrative shape to life. Indeed, as Roth himself says, “you could say that this is a sequel to *The Counterlife*” (Weber 222).

At the end *The Counterlife*, Roth was exhausted by its relentless fictionalization, and *The Facts* and the “life without the fiction” was the antidote (F 311). As a matter of fact, I believe that Zuckerman is not far from the truth when he wrote to Roth, “My guess is that you’ve written metamorphoses of yourself so many times, you no longer have any idea what you are or ever were. By now all you are is walking text” (F 435). In the final stages of this “novelist’s autobiography,” however, Roth seems to have finally recovered and returns to Zuckerman to re-empower himself with creative energy, to repossess the fiction writer from within. Roth himself said that, “with the Zuckerman and Maria letters, I was working my way back into writing fiction” (Weber 224). The way Roth returns to fiction by creating friction in Zuckerman’s life, and he does this through the mundanity of a beard: a beard that heightens Zuckerman’s Semitic look and his Semitic identity; a beard that seems to bring him back to the turbulence of “Christendom,” where Zuckerman, in the face of anti-Semitism, becomes the most Jewish Jew in England, and this causes explosive repercussions in his marriage. With the beard, Roth creates tension and conflict in the almost idyllic married life of the Zuckermans. In this case, it is Roth that makes Zuckerman’s life more interesting. As a matter of fact, *The Facts* ends with Zuckerman protesting at what might be in store for him:

What *is* coming? Why, in her England, *have* I been given this close-cropped, wire-bush, gray-speckled beard? Is what began inconsequentially enough now to yield consequences that, however ridiculous, will send us reeling again? How can our harmonious contentment last much longer when the household's future *is* being determined by someone with your penchant for dramatic upheaval? [...] Is the beard to represent a protest against the pallidness of all this—this randomness? Yet suppose the protest bizarrely evolves into a shattering conflict? I'll be miserable! (F 460-1)

Roth is again in charge, again in control of Zuckerman, his dearest vehicle for narrative invention; and yet he seems to have sympathy for Zuckerman's complaints. Roth leaves him alone, letting him live his happy family life in peace for some years, before divorce and death threats send him back to the deeply American soil of rural Berkshires, Massachusetts, where prostate cancer will be in wait for him. In the nine years intervening between this appearance and the following Zuckerman novel—1997's *American Pastoral*—Roth will dedicate his attention (and three other books) to another counterauthor present in *The Facts*: "Philip Roth."

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I have always been fascinated and taken by the four works that follow *The Counterlife*. Since the first time I read them, I perceived a change in tone: in those books Roth is distinctively less irreverent and more meditative than *Zuckerman Bound* or even *The Counterlife*. I am convinced that the dramatic events of those years—not only was he recovering from the 1987 breakdown, but he was also watching his beloved father succumb to cancer—made him a different person and a different writer. Yet the more somber tone does not interfere with his exploration of the interconnections between life and art, between facts and fiction. Indeed, he makes a bold move: he puts himself in the front line.

In those four books, the counter-author that stands as narrative focus and intelligence is, in fact, "Philip Roth." Probably during the composition of *The Facts*, Philip Roth saw the possibilities that a falsified self-portrait might confer. For three other books—one of which remains Roth's most serious attempt at a memoir—he sticks to the distorted portrait of the artist as a young man commenced in *The Facts*. However, the coherence with the "Philip Roth" of *The Facts* is not persistent: this counterauthor turns to be a character that encompasses so many variations to Roth

that he serves him differently depending on the book, a highly metamorphic figure that is hard to pin down.

In *The Facts*, “Philip Roth” is the grown-up good Jewish boy, an intelligent and exuberant but victimized young man, the genesis of the writer Philip Roth considers himself to be. In *Patrimony*, he is the commendable son who takes care of his dying father, whom Philip dearly loves, the witness to the heartbreaking tragedy that is the ending of the life of a good man. In both these works—the only ones openly non-fictional—“Philip Roth” is a persona that admits only acceptable moral deviancy, a righteous and intelligent man who does not want to say anything too bad about his subjects.

*Deception* shows a side absent from the other two previous narratives. We hear “Philip Roth” having conversations in bed with his lover. Making such intimacy part of the novel, Roth cannot persuade his serious readers that he is telling a true, or partially true, story, but he keeps fondling with his readership’s tendency for the autobiographical misreading. In fact, *Deception* is the only one of these four books that concedes its fictional nature in its subtitle.<sup>16</sup> This “Philip Roth”—another plausible variation on the Roth character—is the pornographer of narrative seduction, an ear looking for his story, an imaginative powerhouse dedicated, like Zuckerman, to the “obsessive reinvention of the real,” a character constantly shifting between the real and the invented, without stating which is which (C 247).

*Operation Shylock*, finally, presents a “Philip Roth” that is both of the above. The man of *The Facts* and *Patrimony* is recognizable, but he allows also to reveal some less admirable aspect of his character, and doing so he leads us to believe that we are getting close to accuracy. He even tells in palpable and reliable detail about the breakdown mentioned in the opening of *The Facts*.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, in spite of Roth’s effort in the interviews to convince the public that *Operation Shylock* was indeed a confession, any serious reader can see that in that book Roth is steeped in fiction, in comedy, in irreverent invention. The “Philip Roth” that seems indeed close to the original is, after all, immersed in a invented comedy of errors, that make also the main character fictional—here we have the most outrageously accurate “Roth” together with the most outrageously false “Roth.”

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<sup>16</sup> *Deception* is subtitle *A Novel*. *The Facts*, *Patrimony*, and *Operation Shylock* have all subtitles that want to indicate their autobiographical nature. Respectively, they are subtitled, *A Novelist’s Autobiography*, *A True Story*, and *A Confession*.

<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the account of the Halcion-induced breakdown of 1987 presented early in the novel seems to be fairly accurate and reliable. It had been corroborated by several sources, even years after the publication of the book, when the pretense that the novel was a confession had vanished. Among these sources are Roth himself, and Claire Bloom, Roth’s ex-wife, in her biased autobiography, *Leaving a Doll’s House*.

On one level, “Philip Roth” is a joke. With this character, Philip Roth trifles with the burden of the autobiographical interpretation of his works, a burden that he bore since the start of his career. If many readers asked themselves, Is what he is telling something that really happened?, with Portnoy, Tarnopol, and Zuckerman, now Roth *wants* the reader to ask such question, leaving him permanently unsteady wondering what is the real and what is the invented. Philip Roth, as he himself said of Konwicki in *The Polish Complex* and *A Minor Apocalypse*, “works to close the gap between the reader and the narrative introducing [“Roth”] as the central character. He strengthens the illusion that the novel is true—and not to be discounted as ‘fiction’—by impersonating himself” (Lee 212).

This consideration, however, leads to more serious ones. As a matter of fact, by making himself the subject of his fiction, Roth continues to problematize the boundaries between life and fiction, and to explore the inner workings of the autobiographical genre that he began in *The Facts*. The questions that the reader asks about this and other Roth characters—What is the extent of the invention and the extent of reality? What is true and what is not?—assume a universal appeal once they are redirected to ourselves and become our own. These books, the natural continuation of the work Roth began with *The Counterlife*, carry on the inquiry on the imaginative processes inherent in leading a life by bringing a new focus on the palpability of the invented, and, particularly in the non-fiction, on the deforming mechanisms at work in the transformation of experience into a coherent narrative. A thorough reading experience of Roth directs out attention to the sort of distortions and fictionalizations of life that are critical not in the book, but in our life, and in the multitude of unwritten stories we depend upon in our lives. In his own attempt to make sense of life through the telling of a story, Roth becomes the archetype of humanity. Thus, he shows how telling inauthentic stories to ourselves is our most basic cognitive act, our fundamental act of self-perception.

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A Roth novel that has recently grown in status, also in my preferences, is *Operation Shylock*—a comic tour de force about identity driven by the same “robust freewheelingness” of *The Counterlife* (WOS 22). Although it is now considered among Roth’s best books,<sup>18</sup> when it came out it encountered only a lukewarm response. Especially hurtful to Roth was John Updike’s unpleasant review in the *New Yorker*, where he wrote that, “Some readers may feel there is too much Philip Roth in the writer’s recent books.” Roth’s exasperation for the clichés about him that persisted—and persist still—in the press was little comparison to what came next. In 1993, the back pain Roth based *The Anatomy Lesson* and *Everyman* on returned, his marriage with Claire Bloom fell apart together with his emotional stability. In her lurid tell-all memoir, Bloom wrote that Roth checked himself into Silver Hill Psychiatric Hospital. He seems to have been on the verge of suicide. Although there is a thick blanket of uncertainty about that period—Bloom’s memoir, the only source for that period, is unreliable, to say the least, and the Chronology in the Library of America edition for 1993 and 1994 is interestingly meager—what is certain is that Roth changed radically.<sup>19</sup> Roth’s friend Norman Manea told David Remnick that,

He went from being a social guy with the world in his fist to being a very reclusive man, very reluctant to reenter the chaos of the world. He created a strong, artificial order that became his natural order. He paid a heavy price, but he was lucky that, having paid it, he was compensated by literature. (“Clear” 88)

Roth overcame the crisis, and with the renewed energy and freedom that recovery granted him, he sat down—or rather, he stood at his lectern—to work again. The first novel that came out after this crisis is *Sabbath’s Theater*: a comic novel about grief and death, about a puppeteer willing but unable to commit suicide; a novel in which Roth’s audacity and shamelessness is given free rein; a novel that, according to Harold Bloom and Frank Kermode, is not only his masterpiece but “the finest American novel of the last quarter of the twentieth century.”<sup>20</sup>

It is after all this that Roth returns to Nathan Zuckerman. Although he is no longer engaged in life as he was in *The Counterlife*, let alone in *Zuckerman Bound*—in fact, he is living a withdrawn,

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<sup>18</sup> For instance, *Operation Shylock* is among the books by Roth included in the New York Times’s 2006 survey, “What is the Best Work of American Fiction of the Last 25 Years?”

<sup>19</sup> The sources for this paragraph are two profiles published around the time of the publication of *The Human Stain*. David Remnick’s “Into The Clear,” probably the best about Roth, is the source of most reliable information about the mid and late Nineties. The other profile is Jennifer Senior’s in *New York*.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. back flap of the volume of the Library of America edition entitled *Novels 1993-1995: Operation Shylock / Sabbath’s Theater*.

quiet country life like Roth's at the time, in a house almost identical to Roth's study—Zuckerman has not lost any creative energy. In the three Zuckerman novels published consecutively between 1997 and 2000 that constitute the American Trilogy—*American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, *The Human Stain*—Zuckerman makes a narrative plunge into the life of others: the stories are not about him, but about Swede Levov, Ira Ringold, Coleman Silk. In these three books, Zuckerman's "life is not a matter of any concern to us, but rather he is the brain, he is the eyes, he is the voice who tells you the story" (WOS 21). The return to this "mediating intelligence" called Zuckerman allows Roth to resume the thematic trajectory interrupted only by *Sabbath's Theater* (WOS 21). Roth's focus shifts from the self to our relationship to other people: he leads a winding meditation on the indefinability of the selves that we encounter, on the impossibility of knowing others, on the human need to know, and the ways in which we give form to the lives of others. If in *The Counterlife* the self came out as a multiplicity of fictions, the American Trilogy is about the clashes of these multiple fictions that emerge when we get to know others, about "this terribly significant business of *other people*" (AP 35).

In *American Pastoral* and *The Human Stain*, the dilemma of the unattainable but necessary knowledge of others is resolved through fiction. The large masses of human matter that are Swede Levov and Coleman Silk reside, for the greater part, in Zuckerman's head. Although Zuckerman makes an effort to transit silently from reality to fiction, a careful reader sees that Zuckerman is the master puppeteer here, too. The Swede as well as Silk are fictional characters that starts from the real Levov and Coleman Silk. Through Zuckerman, Roth returns to tell us that filling the gaps of our knowledge with imagination is what we do. Indeed, "we are all each other's authors" (C 145).

On the other hand, in *I Married a Communist* Zuckerman reconstructs the story of Ira Ringold through the account of six evenings of conversations with Ira's older brother and Nathan's own schoolteacher, Murray. In a subtle way, the novel picks up the issue of the narrativization of experience present particularly in Roth's non-fiction. Ira's story evolves in a labyrinth of narratives and language: Murray Ringold and Nathan Zuckerman are two Scheherazades accumulating tales so as to reach a portrait of a man as close to the real as they can, fighting back inaccuracy, distortion, oblivion, and death. Experience is filtered only through stories, and in this book, like in *Patrimony* and in *The Facts*, Roth dismantles the mechanisms of the transformation of the unplotted life into a cohesive tale.

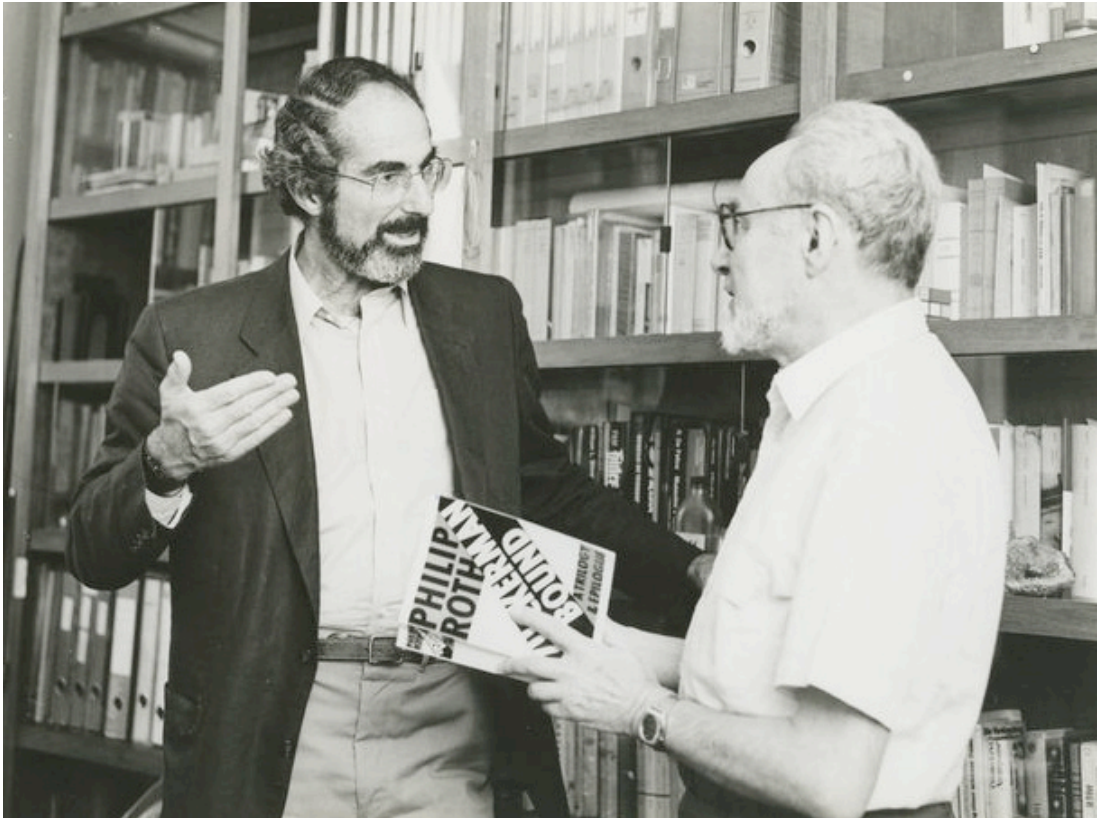
Born out of Roth's advancing age, and the occurrence of such experiences we are all bound to, such as the decay and death of our family and friends, a thematic concentration already seen in *Patrimony* in particular, but also in *The Facts*, re-emerges to enrich the discourse of the American

Trilogy: mortality and the narrative's power to endure. Since in all three books Zuckerman is dealing with the lives of three dead men, his work, as it happens in *Patrimony*, becomes a counterweight to their bodily absence: dissecting and rebuilding their lives, with major or minor poetic license, he makes them endure. By entering "into professional competition with death," his work makes his subjects escape oblivion, and remain alive, at least on the page (HS 338). Continuing the long journey on the imaginative endeavor that stands at the core of living, Roth returns to show us that creating narratives is the way we have to escape the permanent dissolution of our life after death. What is remembering, after all, if not creating stories, with minor or major poetic license? It is through our persisting in this ineluctably inaccurate chronicling that we immortalize life. As long as stories are told, their subjects are immortal.

After the American Trilogy, Roth largely abandons professional writers. Apart from *The Plot Against America*—a counterhistorical novel that imagines the impact of a Nazi-friendly Lindbergh administration upon the life of the members of the Roth family in the early 1940s—Roth finishes his career writing about the fate that awaits us all, about the voyage to "the undiscover'd country from whose bourn no traveller returns" (Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 3.1.81-2). A year after *The Human Stain*, Roth closes the Kepesh sequence with a novella about desire and death, *The Dying Animal*, and, after the hiatus of *The Plot Against America*, he returns to mortality with four novellas, the Nemeses tetralogy, about common people—a retired advertising agent, a student drafted for war, an actor, and a playground counsellor—coping with the nemesis we all share. At the present moment, the last of the Nemeses installment, *Nemesis*, is his last book.

But, before retiring, Roth returns for one last time to Nathan Zuckerman. "The music wasn't finished," he said (WOS 34). In 2007, he publishes *Exit Ghost*, the story of Zuckerman as he attempts to reenter life only to feel the implications of his impotence. Zuckerman is back at the center of the action, but what happens is again an intermingling of facts and fiction. Even in his mid seventies, Nathan Zuckerman maintains his role as the character devoted to the exposé of the presence of fiction in our lives. This is the tale of an old man's last attempt at rejuvenation, his last attempt at a counterlife, and the impossibility of change at that age; and yet the counterlife is still possible on the page, and Zuckerman lives a fictional scenario where change has still a chance, where the sexual possibilities are still open. The illusion lasts only a few days, then Zuckerman flees back to the Berkshires, now "gone for good" (EG 292).

In early 2013, on Roth's computer, in his Upper West Side apartment, there is a Post-It note that reads, "The struggle with writing is over" (McGrath nd). Roth enters the exiguous list of retired writers—for now.



## IMPROVISATIONS ON A SELF

### *A Manifesto For Human Transformation*

He may, perhaps, perceive something simple and continued, which he calls *himself*; though I am certain there is no such principle in me.

— David Hume, *Treatise on Human Nature*

In *Deception*, there is a little scene that I believe is eloquent. Philip, a successful American writer of Jewish descent living in London, is stuck with his work, and invites his lover to play what he calls reality shifts—that is, the impersonation of fictional characters—so that she can help him unlock the material. The premise is this: Philip’s character, Zuckerman, dies at forty-four, and a young

biographer—whom the lover is supposed to play—has started working on him. After having spent five years on a critical biography entitled *Between Worlds: The Life of E. I. Lonoff*, he believes that it would be a quick and easy job; however, the work seems to be more difficult than he thought. The biographer is stuck: he has incurred in a biographer's nightmare, that is, that "everybody gives him a different story" (D 515). The man behind the books seems not to have coherent personality. The biographer has done a lot of research, but still has doubts about his project, because the man only looms in the distance. His idea is not to focus on the writer's childhood in Newark, instead what "interests him is the terrible ambiguity of the 'I,' the way a writer makes a myth of himself and, particularly, *why*. What started it? Where do they come from, all these improvisations on a self?" (D 515). The biography is in fact tentatively titled *Improvisations on a Self*. The reality shift between Philip and his lover does not even touch the question of all the multiple personalities that arise from Zuckerman, and yet this scene is fairly important because Philip (and Roth) individuates the biographer's problem in his inability to fathom the thread that connects all of Zuckerman's impersonations. The biographer's job is to tell the story of the individual self, and the young man in question is unable to find the coherence in his subject's unending metamorphoses. This problem, however, is every biographer's problem. The unending metamorphosis of the self is not a prerogative of writers; it is everybody's life. As Emerson wrote, "*becoming somewhat else* is the whole game of nature, & death the penalty of standing still" (524).

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Roth's work ethics is something that I have come to admire and envy. His dedication to his craft has been relentless over the fifty years of his career, and he has given little space for anything else. As David Remnick wrote, opening his piece on Roth's retirement, "there have been few artists in modern times more single-mindedly devoted to their work than Philip Roth. [...] For much of his life, Roth has lived alone, in rural Connecticut and in Manhattan, spending long days at his desk" ("Enough" nd). His engagement with the outside world varied: in the Seventies and Eighties, for instance, he taught at the University of Pennsylvania and Hunter College, traveled often to Prague and Israel, edited the "Writers from the Other Europe" book series, conducted a series of interviews with other writers later collected in *Shop Talk*. These, however, were mere breaks to the Lonoff-like austerity of most days that permitted him to get his work done. After 1993, he did not

concede himself even those. This persistent commitment to his novels was expressed in the various accounts of his rigorous daily schedule, repeated seven days a week, for decades.<sup>21</sup>

I think that Roth's relentless concentration on the fictional might have been one of the major factors that led him to meditate on the correlations between the factual and the fictional, the real and the invented. With *The Counterlife*, Roth's novels begin to present a reality at whose core stands the human imagination. If in *Zuckerman Bound* it was the fiction writer who held the prerogative for invention and impersonation, since 1986 Roth has understood that the attitude for invention, deformation, and impersonation that is characteristic of the novelist's job is the kernel of the human condition. Since *The Counterlife*, Roth has shown how "we are all writing fictitious versions of our lives all the time, contradictory but mutually entangling stories that, however subtly or grossly falsified, constitute our hold on reality and are the closest thing we have to the truth" (Milbauer 253). Because of the analogy in the mechanisms of fiction-making and living, the job of the novelist becomes the privileged one to explore "life's inherent artfulness" (Posnock 135). Imagining oneself into a story, impersonating someone opposite from the self we claim to be, making the probable and plausible coexist with the real: this is, Roth shows us, the common man's *modus vivendi*.

I am convinced that it is Roth's exploration of "the uneasy equations between art and life" that spurred his new approach toward the subjective identity (Shostak, "Obsessive" 197). From *The Counterlife* emerges a conception of self that goes in a direction opposite the common assumptions. For Roth, the self is a protean and fluid entity at whose core is the capacity for metamorphosis and impersonation. One's self-awareness is nothing but a fictional narrative about oneself; what one goes around claiming to be his identity is a performance, an impersonation of a character one aspires to be. As Parrish says, "for Roth, *the self is fiction*; hence, he understands narrative form and personal identity to be in reciprocal relation" (*Companion*, 130).

It's *all* impersonation—in the absence of a self, one impersonates selves, and after a while impersonates best the self that best gets one through. If you were to tell me that there are people, [...] who actually do have a

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<sup>21</sup> As of 1987, it was described in this way: "By 9:30 each morning he has walked some 50 yards to his house to a two-room cottage that serves as his study. He emerged around 1 for lunch and then disappears until 4.30 in the afternoon, when it is time for a swim in his pool or, if the weather has turned chilly, for a six-mile walk. He spends evenings listening to classical music and reading" (Gray 206). In 2009, the routine did not change much. He took his swim in the morning instead of in the evening, he said to Kirsty Wark. She was so struck by his way of living that she asked him, "Are you lonely?" "I'm not lonely," he replied. She went on. "So, in terms of release and joy, what do you do? You listen to music...What do you do? I can't believe that you lead a life that seems so..." "Austere," Roth completes her. In that interview, he continues along the lines of what he said, a few years earlier, in a more elegant way, to David Remnick: he manages to work "by living a very austere life. I don't experience it as being austere in any negative sense, but you have to be a bit like a soldier with a barracks life, or whatever you want to call it. That is to say, I rule everything else out of my life. I didn't always, but I do now" ("Clear" 89).

*strong sense of themselves*, I would have to tell you that they are only impersonating people with a strong sense of themselves. (C 320)

Life is a performance. Such performance is not unlike the one of the writer, or the one of the actor: being someone consists of impersonating a character in the story that is our life, a unified character that, in that specific moment, one takes to be the person one is, a character who best helps us understand ourselves in relation to our specific reality. We are stories of ourselves, the stories we identify with, the stories that help us make sense of who we are. These stories, however, are not static: in life, we change, and we impersonate different characters, put on different selves, according to the needs and desires of the present moment. Life's performance is an unending flow of acts; and beneath all the acts lies nothing but our ability to impersonate.

If there even *is* a natural being, an irreducible self, it is rather small, I think, and may even be the root of all impersonation—the natural being may be the skill itself, the innate capacity to impersonate. I'm talking about recognizing that one is acutely a performer, rather than swallowing whole the guise of naturalness and pretending that it isn't a performance but you. (C 320).

In Roth's universe, imagination is the quintessential cognitive instrument. In the absence of any form of real stability, we need to imagine it. We compensate for the unforeseen, the illogical, the incomprehensible—the world's as well as one's own—with the illusion of a stable character, a stable self, a stable biography. The idea of order is bestowed through a narrative framework, a story that makes sense of the anarchy of life, which, otherwise, is “sans language, shape, structure, meaning—sans the unities, the catharsis, sans everything” (HS 170). There all our performances and all our impersonations begin: in the depth of our illusory self-perceptions, and the immemorial instability of the real.

Whether or not one falls into the easy trap of taking the words and ideas of Zuckerman's concluding notes in *The Counterlife* for Roth's very own, it is undeniable that Roth's approach to the idea of self changes radically during the composition of his mid-career masterpiece, and moves in the direction laid by those final pages of the novel. In *The Counterlife*, Zuckerman is at work as a writer, imagining characters engaged in remaking their identities, inventing new selves, fabricating new stories through which they can understand themselves. The concept for which underneath everyone's perception of the self lies a narrative structure—also called narrative identity—is also central to *The Facts*, an autobiography in which Roth, after the Halcion breakdown, tries to reconstruct the story of his identity as a writer. As I have illustrated in the previous chapter, in the



final reviewing letter, Nathan Zuckerman lays bare the artificiality of the five-sectioned narrative self-portrait that constitutes the central body of the book. By shedding light to the compositional choices of Roth's own *künstlerroman*, Zuckerman elucidates how one's self-awareness is possible only in a narrative that makes sense of the self as a coherent and unified whole, a whole that offsets the uncognizable multifaceted nature of our reality, and that has little respect for accuracy. The blankness at the bottom of the idea of self presented in *The Counterlife* has to be filled in by a coherent story that we impersonate, a story through which we can recognize our self. However, Zuckerman—or rather, that part of Roth that Zuckerman comes to represent—remains unpersuaded by the novelist's autobiography, and his diagnosis is merciless: "My guess is that you've written metamorphoses of yourself so many times, you no longer have any idea what *you* are or ever were. By now what you are is a walking text" (F 435).

While in *Deception* and *Patrimony* the self is not an issue of eminent relevance,<sup>22</sup> Roth returns to it with a vengeance in his 1993 novel, *Operation Shylock*. Originating from his 1987 meltdown—the same starting point of *The Facts*—it is a novel in which every character, starting from Roth, embodies an identity debate. As one goes through that maze of impersonators and performers, it seems that everyone is, at the same time, looking for himself as well as convincing somebody else that he is someone he is not. Within the novel, the narrative self-portraits—true or false, aspiring at fidelity or purely deceptive—abound so much that most characters come to incarnate several people. Indeed, most of them are "a theater and nothing more than a theater" (C 321). While *The Counterlife*, *The Facts*, and *Operation Shylock* are the works in which this subject is most prominent, the idea of the self as a protean entity constructed on our capacity to impersonate perdure also in Roth's later works. The following Zuckerman novels in particular center around characters—Levov, Ringold, and Silk in the American trilogy, and Zuckerman himself in *Exit Ghost*—who spend their lives in the attempt to reinvent themselves, to find the right self to impersonate. Until the very end, life is "*all* impersonation" (C 320).

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<sup>22</sup> While not crucial, it is interesting how the idea of self is developed in *Patrimony* and *Deception*. In *Patrimony*, the interesting issue is how the self of the central character, Herman Roth, is presented through fragments of memory. Philip Roth resists descriptive identification, but rather presents him dramatically through anecdotes. The narrative component is fundamental, but there is a reluctance in composing a unified whole. *Patrimony* is interesting also with regards to the self that Philip Roth is: he depicts himself only through the lens of the loving son, leaving out most of what is his literary trademark. This idea of self featured in *Deception* is another element of the novel's confusion about facts and fiction. The main character, "Philip," is—potentially—both a factual and a fictional self, and the selves he impersonates are several. Since, at the end of *Deception*, the reader is not certain what is true and what is false, he cannot create a hierarchy in the various impersonations of "Philip" he has witnessed. "Philip" remains a confusion of selves.

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The conceptual core of Roth's idea of a self is first delineated in the Zuckerman letter that concludes *The Counterlife*. That same letter, however, is instilled with doubts about the exactitude of Zuckerman's idea of subjective identity. Roth's favorite counterauthor is the first one to admit that "there is no way of proving whether I'm right or not, this is a circular argument from which there is no escape" (C 320). Even to Zuckerman, as for most of us, the self remains an open question. However, this doubt does not detain him from exploring the innards of our psychological stability and self-consciousness, and he knows he is not the first one to do it: "the whole idea of what is a self philosophers have gone on about at extraordinary lengths, and, if only from the evidence here, it is a very slippery subject" (C 321). Indeed, not only philosophers, but also artists and scholars in various fields have tried to answer the question, What is the self?, providing all sorts of answers. Roth's take on the self, however, is not new. In the eighties also the American philosopher Daniel Dennett was working on a similar take on the self. In "The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity," not only does he consider the self as "an abstract object, a theorist's fiction," but he also espouses the analogies between writing and living, proposing a discourse whose gist is identical to the one Roth makes in *The Counterlife* and in *The Facts* (Dennett, nd).

We are all, at times, confabulators, telling and retelling ourselves the story of our own lives, with scant attention to the question of truth. [...] It does seem that we are all virtuoso novelists, who find ourselves engaged in all sorts of behavior, more or less unified, but sometimes disunified, and we always put the best "faces" on it we can. We try to make all of our material cohere into a single good story. And that story is our autobiography. The chief fictional character at the center of that autobiography is one's *self*. (Dennett, nd)

Although not expressed in the same terms, Dennett's theorization of the self's dependency on narratives structures and their fictionality is convergent with Roth's own: the cardinal principle is, after all, that of impersonation.

Contemporary philosophers are not alone in trying to answer these questions. Sociolinguists have tried to give their answers in relation to the self and the stories we create about it. Ultimately, they provide a support for Roth's ideas. The literature on this field argues extensively—using real life cases rather than fiction—on our reliance on stories to construct and apprehend ourselves. As Schiffrin says, scholarship "suggests that narrative structure is a way to arrive at an understanding

of the self as a whole; our actions and experiences gain meaning through their relationship to one another, as well as their relationship to general themes and plots” (168-9). This narrative framework creates a sense of purpose and connectedness otherwise absent, and hence permits identification with a recognizable character that one goes around impersonating, a character that is one’s means to relate to the external world—indeed, we “*become* the autobiographical narrative by which we tell about our lives” (Bruner 15). Once one—a sociolinguist, an author, a reader—understands the displacement of our identity from the self to an artificially unified story we faithfully adhere to, one can be overwhelmed. We are accustomed to consider our self a solid, well-defined entity; instead, it is a story we compose and teach ourselves to believe in, a story that is not immutable, a story at whose center is a feeble core that, as Zuckerman says, “may even be the root of all impersonation—the natural being may be the skill itself, the innate capacity to impersonate” (C 320). Along these lines, Kerby argues that the self is not “behind the [narrative] acts, visible and fully formed at their inception; the self is rather a result of actions, something that actions imply” (56). Investigating the same portion of reality from two different points of view, these scholars and Philip Roth have arrived at the same destination. Unknowingly—I doubt that Roth is well read in sociolinguistics—they mutually sustain each others’ visions on self and self-perception, and foreground what we are almost always oblivious to, that is, our elemental dependency on the narrative structures through which we apprehend the real.

The form of the novel allows Philip Roth, with his almost thirty-year stubborn dedication to the art of fiction, to deal with the self and the stories about the self in ways a philosopher or a sociolinguist cannot. I have not yet concentrated my attention on what is the most fundamental feature of Roth’s idea of a self—metamorphosis. The self that emerges from some of Roth’s most powerful novels is the very opposite of the stable essence that we identify with the first person pronoun: the self is mercurial, always flowing into a different form. Although the “irreducible self” is either absent or very small, it contains the freedom to impersonate— “the natural being may be the skill itself,” Zuckerman says (C 320). Indeed, we always have a congruent narrative matrix that is ours, a master story that we identify with, yet such story is not pre-determined. It can change. The story of the self can be rewritten. The possibilities for transformation and reinvention are endless.

I understood that people are trying to transform themselves all the time: the universal urge to be otherwise. So as not to look as they look, sound as they sound, be treated as they are treated, suffer in the ways they suffer, etc., etc., they change hairdos, tailors, spouses, accents, friends, they change their addresses, their noses, their wallpaper, even their form of government, all to be more like themselves or less like themselves,

or more like or less like the exemplary prototype whose image is their to emulate or repudiate obsessively for life. (OS 161-2).

The narrative focus of *The Counterlife* lies in this “universal urge to be otherwise” (OS 161). Rather than being about people whose self is absent, it revolves around Zuckerman imagining people who are living with the consequences of their dreams or of the realization of being someone they are not. In the letter in which Zuckerman imagines Maria’s departure from the book, he makes her evoke life’s ineluctable variability in one of the novel’s many memorable passages: “I recognize that radical change is the law of life and that if everything quietens down on one front, it invariably gets noisy on the another; I recognize that to be born, to live, and to die is to change form, but you overdo it” (C 312). Maria’s problem is indeed Nathan Zuckerman’s excessive metamorphoses. Impersonation, to Zuckerman, becomes the great game at the core of the novelist’s profession, and the self and the identity are the novelist’s plasticine. Zuckerman underlines the profession’s ludic aspect when he responds to Maria saying that

it *is* interesting trying to get a handle on one’s own subjectivity—something to think about, to play around with, and what’s more fun than that? Come back and we’ll play with it together. We could have great times as Homo Ludens and wife, inventing the imperfect future. We can pretend to be anything we want. All it takes is impersonation. (C 321)

Maria’s rebellion against the book and her creator is centered on the obsessive character of Zuckerman’s reinvention, which every reader cannot deny. Zuckerman’s aim, however, is to show how the game of pretending is not only the novelist’s job— the serious play of impersonation is everyone’s life.

I have to admit that the final pages of *The Counterlife* had a disheartening effect on me. Zuckerman is aware that “the whole Western idea of mental health runs in precisely the opposite direction: what is desirable is congruity between your self-consciousness and your natural being” (C 320). If we are nothing but the stories we tell ourselves we are, we are hollow at the core, Zuckerman says. This is the very opposite of comforting. I cannot but agree with Parker Royal when he writes that “there is nonetheless a disturbing sense of individual emptiness and nihilism suggested by this conception” (“Plotting” 438). My belief is that Roth felt that too, that he too would say, like Zuckerman, that, “I’ve practically written myself *out* of life” (C 188). In an important way, this notion of selfhood seems to herald the 1987 mental “disintegration” that

originates both *The Facts* and *Operation Shylock*.<sup>23</sup> Paradoxically, however, I also felt highly energized and liberated by the freedom that the absence of a univocal self can give. As Shostak underlines,

Roth insists that freedom exists in the capacity to invent counterlives. Although it is a freedom that is literally fictitious, our knowledge that the fiction replaces no prior ‘truth,’ no transcendent presence, makes the freedom it offers more authentic. [...] Counterstories, then, are a way to gain authority over one’s life—and over the *author* of one’s life. (“Obsessive” 208-9)

The intricacies and paradoxes of the subjective identity are not a novel subject. All literature—from Homer to Aleksandar Hemon—seems to me to be a long, unending investigation of the human individuality in relation to everything that touches it. Every work of fiction, eventually, ends up asking the same question: what does being a singular human being consist of? Fiction writers cannot explore reality if not chained to the singular perspective. We cannot absorb the real if not in the first person singular; or, as Joseph Conrad wrote, “We live, as we dream—alone....” (*Heart* 27). When it comes to Philip Roth, one cannot minimize the centrality of this question. His unidealized, and unmythologized stand on the subjective identity is one of his trademarks, and his unrestrained approach permitted him to delve into the manifold implications of the twentieth-century subjectivity with a sharpness of intellect that made many of his contemporary envious. Through the thorough exploitation of the reality as he experienced it, he presented to his reader a picture of the individual in his perennial strives, instincts, and desires, a picture of enduring power. In the mid 1980s, when his notion of self blooms in all its complexity, Roth overturns the common assumptions on subjectivity, and he gives his readers the two novels that more overtly address the meaning of a self—*The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock*.

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<sup>23</sup> Derek Parker Royal wrote that Zuckerman’s idea of self “anticipates the emotional breakdown—disintegration, he calls it—that the *character* Philip Roth undergoes in *The Facts* and *Operation Shylock*” (“Plotting” 438, emphasis added). I largely agree with him, but one has to make a distinction. I believe that it is important to remember that the emotional breakdown occurs to the man Philip Roth, not the character. Interviews, profiles, and memoirs corroborated the veracity of this event. Obviously enough, Roth translates this event to the character “Philip Roth,” but it is happens in life before happening on the page.

*A Classic of Irresponsible Exaggeration*

Flowing is the secret of things.

— Ralph W. Emerson, “The Natural History of the Intellect”

It is generally assumed that the most defining experiences of a human being occur in the world of real events. Indeed, for most people this holds true. Yet, for a few, crucial events in one’s life are provoked by events that have no concrete footing in palpable world. In my case—as, I assume, in most serious readers’—some of the most transforming and defining experiences took place while I was sitting on my reading chair. My immersions in the fictional worlds of Shakespeare, Roth, James, Sebald have taught me new ways to see the reality around me, and *The Counterlife* was a critical moment in my life as a reader and as a man.

My first attempt to tackle *The Counterlife* did not go through; not so much for the novel’s complexity as for the rookie mistake of reading an important novel without having enough time to give it the constant attention it demanded. It was some years ago, but I cannot forget, the day after I began reading “Judea” and the adventures of Henry as a resurrected man in Israel, my enthusiasm uncurbed in the conversations with a friend and fellow student at university. Sadly, I had to set it aside for some other novel I had to read for a literature course. No sooner had I picked it up again some months later than such enthusiasm resurged and only grew in strength as I went on. Indeed, it only grew one reading after another, because *The Counterlife* is one of those books that, in order to

be properly grasped, requires more than a couple of readings. The first time I read the novel I was amused and bewildered by its playfulness, but in the end I did not understand well what I had gone through; the second time, I was too enmeshed in its convoluted structure, and was too much concentrated on interpreting it as a how-to manual for the professional writer; the third time, I began asking the right questions, especially about identity. Around the second and third time, I began studying the novel, reading interviews and criticism. I began writing about it. The brief thesis for my *laurea triennale* dealt with the importance of the notebook entries in “Basel.” However, only in the fourth reading, which I completed just a few days ago, I felt I have come to a full comprehension of *The Counterlife* and what Zuckerman says in the concluding letter. What did I understand in four readings? I understood that it is a dangerous novel.

With *The Counterlife*, I had an experience I had with very few and very good works of literature—it made me doubt everything. Its idea of a self was at the core of this transforming experience. First of all, it asks the reader to dismantle the common assumptions on the self and to consider the conception I described above. In front of the novel’s last pages, I wondered what the prototype of my self is, what kind of narrative I cast myself into, how many subselves I impersonated in my life so far. Then, I meditated also on the opportunities that the non-determination of the self provided—namely, the unbound possibilities of self-determination, the endless capacity for renewal, the complete authorial control we have on our identity. My confrontation with such upheaving ideas could not help having consequences. There are many things that make *The Counterlife* an adventurous intellectual journey for the reader: it can be liberating in its conception of self, it can be baffling in its presentation of the concrete reality of the invented, it can be provoking in its myriad insights on the human character. However, I want to linger on the novel’s nihilism. The notion of the human stain explored in the eponymous novel fifteen years later begins here, in the novel’s discussion of the human pursuit of the pastoral, “the idyllic scenario of redemption through the recovery of a sanitized, confusionless life” (C 322). Zuckerman argues that our unending search of that personalized elaboration of happiness is inevitable but eventually pointless; that the concretization of those “imagined world, often green and breastlike, where we may finally be ‘ourselves,’” is a chimera—or, he puts it, “yet another of our mythological pursuits” (C 322). Real life is something else. Life revels in the opposite of all that—the counter-pastoral; and circumcision becomes the symbolic, physical reminder of what life is about, the Jewish token of the human stain.

Circumcision is everything that the pastoral is not and, to my mind, reinforces what the world is about, which isn't strifeless unity. Quite convincingly, circumcision gives the lie to the womb-dream of life in the beautiful state of innocent prehistory, the appealing idyll of living "naturally," unencumbered by man-made ritual. To be born is to lose all that. The heavy hand of human values falls upon you right at the start, marking your genitals as its own. (C 323)

Is the inevitable persistence of life's confusion what I want to believe at twenty-six? Is this not a keen observation of the real, devoid of all naiveté? Is this what life is really about? These are the questions this novel urged me to ask myself. It does not matter what I believe now, but that *The Counterlife* is one of those novels—the good ones—that demands this sort of personal introspection. Enough to change somebody.

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*Portnoy's Complaint* may be Roth's most career-defining novel. Not only was it the novel in which he found his own voice, but it was also a purveyor of literary success, popularity, and financial prosperity. However, it is *The Counterlife* that stands as the most pivotal opus. Chronologically placed at the exact center of Roth's writing life, it marks a critical aesthetic transition in Roth's art, as all scholars note.<sup>24</sup> Ross Posnock summarizes its core effectively by saying that, "badly stated, it is a move from a guilty relation to art and impersonation to an exuberantly ludic stance" (127). Up to *The Counterlife*, Roth's characters—particularly Nathan Zuckerman in *Zuckerman Bound*—are constantly craving for the real. The stubborn dedication required to the art of fiction forces the writer to retire from society and steep himself in imagined worlds, a movement that generates a counter-instinctual desire for the real thing—only in front of cancer patients in a hospital, Zuckerman says, "*This is life. With real teeth in it*" (AL 449). The impalpability of the profession requires a counterbalancing concreteness. Despite all the potential of fiction, the real maintains the highest degree of importance and originality. The barriers between facts and fiction, the hierarchy

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<sup>24</sup> There is a consensus among scholars that *The Counterlife* is a pivotal work: in his monograph, Ross Posnock entitles the chapter for this novel, "'A very slippery subject': *The Counterlife* as pivot," and opens by saying that it "is not only pivotal chronologically but is a crucial transition in Roth's art" (C 125); Masiero, in her monograph, says, "*The Counterlife* is pivotal in the typically Rothian questioning of the relationship between what is real and what is fictional" (*Zuckerman* 102); Derek Parker Royal starts an article about *The Counterlife* by saying that "of all Philip Roth's novels, *The Counterlife* is perhaps his most pivotal" ("Postmodern" 422); Debra Shostak does not say it explicitly, but her work foregrounds *The Counterlife*'s crucial role in Roth's art.



that places the first above the second, are annihilated. The value and the definition of the real are augmented by the inclusion of the palpable reality of the imaginary, which begins to be considered as relevant as the factual one. Then the subject of fiction—"the truth, manifold and one" (Conrad "Preface" 279)—begins to include not only what we perceive, but also what we imagine and invent. Ever since *The Counterlife*, the real loses its commonly-assumed stability, the immunity to mutation, and imagination ushers change in. The real as such—and the self, a part of the real—is ungraspable; it is accessible to us only through the filter of our imagination, and the narratives we create about it. Our imagination, our "reinvention of the real" keeps the unfiltered, independent reality forever at bay. "We have to live with out accounts of the real," Ross Posnock writes, "and with their inevitable frailty" (135).

About *The Counterlife*, Roth himself explains,

It isn't that it lacks a beginning, middle, and ending; there are too *many* beginnings, middles, and endings. It is a book where you never get to the bottom of things—rather than concluding with all the question answered, at the end everything is suddenly open to question. Because one's original reading is always being challenged and the book progressively undermines its own fictional assumptions, the reader is constantly cannibalising his own reactions. (Milbauer 252)

Let's start from the beginning. In "Basel," Nathan Zuckerman attends the funeral of his younger brother, who just died after a risky bypass surgery that he undertook to regain his sexual potency, a side effect of heart pills. Nathan spends the funeral trying to reinterpret it under the light of an undelivered eulogy he wrote the night before, a eulogy that recounted his brother's extramarital affairs. In fact, he spends much of his time trying to find Wendy Casselman, the young assistant he supposed to be Henry's lover and the true real reason for the operation, and whose existence can be doubted even from the start. In the meantime, he also remembers—via notebook entries—Henry's earlier affair with a Swiss patient, Maria, which almost brought the younger Zuckerman brother to move with her to Basel, and reinvent himself as an expatriate American dentist. In "Judea," Nathan Zuckerman—coming from London where he lives with his wife, Maria—is in Israel. He has gone there not only to see his friend Shuki Elchanan, a renowned journalist, and to see the Wailing Wall, but most importantly to visit Henry. The latter responded to a depression that followed his successful heart operation with a religious rebirth and a relocation to Agor, an Israeli settlement on the West Bank led by an exuberant militant, Mordecai Lippman. In his visit, Nathan becomes the audience of many loud voices raising from Israel: on the one hand he listens to Shuki's profound

disillusionment with his country; on the other, Nathan's status as a Diaspora Jew becomes the object of attack at Agor, where he is taught a lesson on the authentic Jewish identity according to Lippman and his followers. However, the central aim of Nathan's trip is to check on Henry and his new life as Jewish settler, both for filial duty and writerly curiosity. Nathan is immensely interested in his brother's unexpected mid-life renewal; in the end, however, their discussions all but exacerbate their old divides. "Aloft" tracks Zuckerman's flight back from Tel Aviv to Israel. At the start, Nathan works on two letters: the first to Henry, in response to their encounter; the other is an answer to a letter Shuki left for Nathan at his hotel. In the middle of the latter, Nathan is interrupted by Jimmy Ben-Joseph, a mischievous young man Nathan met at the Wailing Wall, who implicates the novelist in a hijacking. "Gloucestershire" is divided in three movements. The first, set in New York, tells about Nathan Zuckerman's affair with Maria Freshfield, an unhappy English woman living with an unhappy husband in the apartment upstairs. The affair cannot be consummated because Nathan is suffering from the same predicament Henry suffers in "Basel," and the release of desire occurs in their conversations. Nathan finally opts for surgery for the dream of a family and a child with Maria. The second movement opens on Nathan Zuckerman's funeral, and we follow Henry's reaction to his ambivalent feelings toward his brother and the eulogy delivered. After this, Henry goes to his brother's New York apartment to destroy all the evidence of his affair with Maria in Nathan's notebooks. After he found everything he looked for, Henry finds a manuscript on Nathan's desk headed "Draft #2." It consists of "Basel," "Judea," an untitled chapter about a hijacking, and "Christendom," the chapter coming after the one we are reading. He barely controls the wrath at how his brother depicted him. He leaves with sections of the notebooks and the first two chapters of the manuscript, which he dumps in a trash can on his way home. The third movement is an interview between Zuckerman's ghost and Maria about "Christendom" and its possible consequences on her marriage. In "Christendom," Nathan is just back from Israel, and he attends with Maria and her family a Christmas service in London. During the ensuing buffet, he has a virulent conversations with Maria's sister, who does not restrain her anti-Semitism; she concludes by raising the question of the christening of the child Maria is pregnant with. After evoking the time when Nathan first met Mrs. Freshfield in Gloucestershire, the novelist and Maria go to dinner. At the restaurant, a woman makes a loud anti-Semitic remark about them, which elicits Nathan's response. Once the couple gets home, they start a quarrel about her family's anti-Semitism and the question of the christening. The quiet Maria bursts in anger against Zuckerman, who leaves for the house they are renovating in Chiswick.

This long but necessary overview provides a decent synopsis on the book's complex structure. At the end of each chapter, the narrative premises are overturned, and the reader is constantly provoked by these narratives which both contradict and converse with one another. This novel offers the opposite of the common reading experience, since it denies a firm ground onto which the reader can hold his footing: characters die and resuscitate, events that happen in one chapter are not valid in the following. "Which is real and which is false? All are equally real or equally false. Which are you asking me to believe in? All/none," Roth said in an interview (Milbauer 253). I for one have yielded to the temptation of trying to pinpoint a coherent plot line, a recognizable structure along which the novel develops, or establish a hierarchy among the various chapters. "Judea," "Aloft," and "Christendom," all told by Nathan in the first person, seem to take place along the same time frame, since they chronologically follow one another. Yet the hijacking in "Aloft" is contradicted in the opening of "Christendom." The structure based on variations on the predicament of impotence and the possible outcome on the bypass operation on the Zuckerman brothers might work for "Basel," "Judea," and "Gloucestershire," but "Christendom" does not mention either impotence or an operation. The discovery of "Draft #2" in "Gloucestershire" seem to explain the incoherencies in the other chapters, which feel subordinate to this one. However, one cannot simply accept this, since one cannot fall for the premise of this chapter, that is, that Zuckerman, the narrative center of the novel, is dead. However, all these chapters are distinctly linked to one another. Henry, for instance, is identifiable as the same throughout, in "Judea" as well as in "Gloucestershire." As Shostak notes, "*The Counterlife* is not completely incoherent, but its coherence is not as readily available as its realistic mode of storytelling might suggest" ("Obsessive" 213). The letters that conclude the novel give meaning to this succession of incoherent but entangled narratives that left the reader—at least, that was what happened to me—confused and amused.

As Zuckerman sits outside his house in Chiswick, he imagines the letter Maria would leave if she left him. Yet the letter is not simply imagined. With the beginning of such letter, the reader exits the incoherent narrative environment of the previous chapters, and enters in a metafictional bubble in which Maria, a character aware of her artificiality, and Nathan, her creator, exchange letters. Maria opens hers by announcing her departure from the book. She wants a tranquil life, and she can no longer bear the intensity and the constant conflict that Zuckerman puts her through in the novel we have just read. For her, it is impossible to accept to go through his death and the anti-Semitic outburst that can destroy their marriage only for the sake of his fiction. The quiet, family life she wants with him is not Zuckerman's genre, and a life where they are constantly opposed and

antagonized is not for her. “You want to play reality-shift?” she says to her husband, “Get yourself another girl” (C 318). Zuckerman’s response—the cornerstone of Roth’s discourse on the subjective identity, as it has already become clear—opens with a declaration of the idea that a self is a series of impersonations, and he, a novelist, has “no self independent of my imposturing, artistic efforts to have one” (C 321). After inviting her back—“we could have great times as Homo Ludens and wife, inventing the imperfect future” (C 321)—he discusses the ideal of the pastoral, refusing it for its lack of complexity. He counterposes it with circumcision, a reminder of what life is about. So *The Counterlife* ends.

What did I make of these letters the first time I read them? As far as the complex ideas they present are concerned, not much as I fully understood them only in my fourth reading. However, they were fundamental for a comprehension of the structural foundation of the novel. As Debra Shostak effectively puts it, “the ‘reality’ of the novel is nothing *but* its fictiveness, its multiplication of possible realities, while at the same time its fictions are presented as participating in concrete, gritty, and comic examples of felt life, much in the style of American realism” (“Obsessive” 199). It is in these two letters, in fact, that the reader is given the chance to grasp that every chapter of the novel is a fiction penned by Nathan Zuckerman, and every event and character is a product of his imagination. As Henry and Maria claim in “Gloucestershire,”<sup>25</sup> Henry, Maria, the Freshfield sisters are variations on the theme of Nathan Zuckerman—all is born there, in the author’s imagination. When we enter the final metafictional limbo, our quest for an explanation of the incongruities, for a reality we can delude ourselves to believe in ends with the resignation that there is no such reality—the reading is so unsettling because there is no reality in *The Counterlife* beside the invented. By shattering narratives conventions and sending the reader upon a journey on one literary cul-de-sac after the other, Roth creates a profound meditation on “how imagination constructs reality” (Rothstein “World” 200). While it presents the anatomy of professional fiction making, *The*

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<sup>25</sup> In different passages of “Gloucestershire,” both Henry and Maria attribute their fictional counterpart in, respectively, “Basel” and “Judea,” and “Christendom,” to Nathan himself. Commenting of “Draft #2,” Henry says, “What is most disgusting, Henry thought, the greatest infringement and violation, is that this is *not* me, not in any way. [...] His Henry is, if anyone, *him*—it’s Nathan, using me to conceal himself while simultaneously disguising himself *as* himself, as *responsible*, as *sane*, disguising himself as a reasonable man while I am revealed as the absolute dope. The son of a bitch abandons the disguise *at the very moment he’s lying most!*” (C 226-7). Some pages later, Maria says something similar about her anti-Semitic sister in “Christendom”: “I thought there was something deeply twisted in him that he couldn’t help. Because he had been brought up as he was, ringed round by all that Jewish paranoia, there was something in him that twisted everything. It seemed to me that *he* was my sister—*he* was the one who thought of ‘the other’ as the other in that derogatory sense. He’d put all his feelings, actually, onto her—his Jewish feelings about Christian women turned into a Christian woman’s feeling about a Jewish man. I thought that great verbal violence, that ‘hymn of hate’ he ascribed to Sarah, was in *him*” (C 243). I believe these comments are very interesting. One can debate on what Zuckerman is doing with Henry and Maria in these passages: on the one hand, one can consider them as profound insights on how the novelist’s mind works; on the other, one can easily dismiss Henry’s and Maria’s comments as the angry vents of two people who felt abused in fiction. In this, as well as many other occasions, *The Counterlife* raises the question without providing an answer.

*Counterlife* makes explicit how the ability to create imaginary scenarios is a “practice ubiquitous in daily life” (Posnock 132), how imagining one’s life in all possible directions is the means we have of thinking about ourselves.

Yet why does Roth bother us like this? The novel’s experimentalism, the year in which it was published, and its idea of self have invited reading the novel through the deconstructionist lenses, but that direction is misleading. Although it does not appear to be a realist novel, *The Counterlife* is steeped in Roth’s life-long commitment to mimetic fiction. The novel’s refusal to assume a linear shape renders effectively life’s own unpredictable directions, its negation of a recognizable design, “its recalcitrance to formal shapeliness, its ‘intractability,’ to borrow Peter Tarnopol’s word” (Posnock 131). In an interview Roth asked himself the question I opened this paragraph with to elucidate how *The Counterlife*’s structure is all but the mimetic act. This was his response.

Because life doesn’t necessarily have a course, a simple sequence, a predictable pattern. The bothersome form is intended to dramatise that very obvious fact. The narratives are all awry but they have a unity; it is expressed in the title—the idea of counterlife, counterlives, counterliving. Life, like the novelist, has a powerful transforming urge. (Milbauer 253)

This is the most bothersome and the most powerful aspect of *The Counterlife*. Not only does this novel give the opportunity to enter the backstage of fiction-making, but it invites the more careful and meditative reader to doubt the defining unities of his existence; to include the imaginative into the real, in its startling concreteness; to question his identity and see life as a play of transformations; to allow contradiction within and to find the unity in contradiction; to reimagine himself in a form different from the previous one, and to reimagine himself once again, only to realize that this is what his life has been so far—not a life led by a recognizable stable man who maintained his immutable traits throughout the years, but a man in a continuous flow of transformation. Indeed, “radical change is the law of life” and “to be born, to live, and to die is to change form” (C 312). This is why the reading of *The Counterlife* was such an intense experience for me: it demanded me to see my life and my subjective identity from a new perspective.

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Logically enough, the collapse of the barriers between fact and fiction in *The Counterlife* leads Roth to concentrate on the role that the imagination plays in our lives and on the narrative strategies through which we deal with the imaginary. How are our lives defined by what we imagine? How much of ourselves is imagined and how much is real? How does imagination concur in forming our subjectivity? And, if we perceive ourselves through stories, how much of those stories is real and how much is not? These questions are the starting point of *The Counterlife*. After decades spent making up things out of thin air, decades of keen observation of the real, Philip Roth must have realized that what he did as an author—that is, reinventing the real through his imaginative powers—is something that people ordinarily do with themselves.

The creative effort embedded in living a life and the need for a coherent narrative that would make sense to our contradicting subselves is at the heart of the encounter between Nathan and Henry in Israel.<sup>26</sup> After the successful life-threatening surgery, Henry plunges into a deep post-operative depression. During a trip with friends to Israel, organized to cheer him up, he has a religious experience as he listens to students chanting a hymn in the Orthodox quarter of Jerusalem. This leads him to move permanently in Israel—more exactly in Agor, a fictional settlement on the West Bank—where he studies Hebrew and the Torah, and helps his mentor, Mordecai Lippman, a militant settler with unrestrained zeal, in the Jewish nationalist cause. There people do not call him Henry, but Hanoch.<sup>27</sup> This is the new Henry Nathan goes to meet: a Henry that razed his former life to the ground, that “has the courage at forty to treat himself like raw material” (C 148). This radical renewal in Henry’s life is nothing but a total recomposition of the narrative he identifies with: the moment he decides to relocate in Israel, his identity needs a new story, a story he is composing from the new perspective of the militant Jewish settler. This story makes sense not only of his present, but also of the life he left behind, and creates coherence out of paradoxes, inconsistencies, and

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<sup>26</sup> One has always to remember, when speaking of *The Counterlife*, of the fictional nature of all its chapters. Debra Shostak is right in putting all the names of the novel within inverted commas, because all of them are inventions of Zuckerman. In the novel, for instance, there is no Henry disassociated from Nathan Zuckerman’s imagination. However, in the subsequent readings, one forgets this fact and considers the characters as if they were normal ones. In my analysis, I ask my reader to be always conscious that the characters are Nathan’s inventions; however, when addressing other issues, I find that reminding this fact over and over, even with the unobtrusive presence of the inverted commas, is distracting.

<sup>27</sup> In *The Counterlife* as well as in *Operation Shylock*, Roth underlines the power of naming things. The name is a representation of the identity, a marker of the self, and in many ways it is often adjusted according to the situation. Henry, for instance, calls himself Hanoch in Israel: this is a symbol of his radical transformation. By changing his name he refuses his former identity and embraces the new one he assumes in Israel. This question is more interestingly developed in *Operation Shylock*, where “Philip” faces his double, who bears the same name. As Shostak notes, “in the usurpation of the proper name, language fails on the primary level of nominalization to distinguish self from other for Philip” (“Diaspora” 730). This is why “Philip” needs to rename his double as Moïshe Pipik, a name that stands as a marker of his bogus identity.

contradictions. From this point of view, the most interesting aspect is not the metamorphosis of Henry Zuckerman of New Jersey—a successful dentist, father of three, with a beautiful wife and a beautiful lover, who never cared about his being a Jew—to Hanoch, the American doctor who made aliyah, the fervent student of Judaism, pupil of Lippman, and selfless pawn of nationalist Zionism. The most interesting aspect is the total reconsideration of his identity under the lenses of the Judaist perspective. As Nathan and Henry are having lunch in Hebron, they discuss Henry's new life and his former one in New Jersey. Henry disparages everything that he maintained important before the operation and elevates to prominence what at the time he could not care less about—his Jewishness.

“Hellenized—hedonized—egomaniacized. My whole *existence* was the sickness. I got off easy with just my heart. Diseased with self-distortion, self-contortion, diseased with self-disguise—up to my eyeballs in meaninglessness.”

First it was the life of Riley, now it was nothing but a disease. “You felt all that?”

“Me? I was so conventionalized I never felt anything.” (C 111)

This passage is interesting because it creates the bridge of coherence between his present and his past—in other words, a redrawing of his former life in America. How can he assimilate otherwise his previous life, which is antithetical to his current one? His life as a dentist and family man in New Jersey has to be put in the Judaist frame of reference. The exchange above provides not only an interpretation of Henry's past in key with his present life, but also a motivation for his blindness toward his Jewishness when he was in America. These two precious elements create a consistent line of interpretation that constitutes Henry's new narrative of the self, a narrative that renders the past and the present intelligible, that turns the self a unified entity without contradiction.

Here the congruity between fiction making and identity construction cannot be clearer. The narrative of the self needs to be formulated in a way very similar to the fiction writer's. Our hold on the real cannot be separate by its imaginative component. The truth of our identity lies in the fictionally-enhanced narrative constructions we believe of ourselves. Henry firmly refuses his former existence—“my grotesque apology for a life,” he calls it effectively (C 107)—because, in Agor, he sees it as determined by what he considers the malaise of the post-assimilated Jew in the Diaspora. Nathan may be closer to the objective reality when he sees Henry's reinvention as a rebellion against the social prescriptions of the bourgeois family man, against “the intolerable disorder of virile pursuits and the indignities of secrecy and betrayal” that come with adultery (C 132). However, this is not the truth of Henry's story, this is not the truth Henry perceives. Henry invents for himself a story that helps him make sense of himself in his new chosen environment; it

matters little whether what he believes conforms or not to the objective reality, if there is one. Henry's subjective identity in "Judea" consists in the conjured narrative of the Zionist Torah student. Nathan's interest in his brother lies in this: Henry's courage to author himself imaginatively. "The treacherous imagination is everybody's maker—we are all the invention of each other," Nathan writes in the unsent letter to this brother, "everybody a conjuration conjuring up everyone else. We are all each other's authors" (C 145).

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Philip Roth's emphasis in *The Counterlife*, however, is not so much on narrative identity as on how we change our stories. As Roth himself points out, this novel's "obsession is with the transformation of lives" (Rothstein "World"198). This obsession with transformation, however, is inseparable from the conception of the self I explained above. Metamorphosis is possible because the narrative that constitutes one's individuality is mutable. We cling to the biography we establish for ourselves, but such biography remains a fiction that is liable to transform. The freedom to change is intrinsic to the narrative of the self. In an interview, Philip Roth insisted effectively on the mundanity of this narrative anarchy:

There really is nothing unusual about somebody changing his story. People constantly change their story—one runs into that every day. "But last time you told me—" "Well, that was last time—this is this time. What happened was..." There is nothing "modernist," "postmodernist" or the least bit avant-garde about the technique. We are writing fictitious version of our lives all the time. (Milbauer 253)

*The Counterlife's* dramatic core resides in the human need for transformation. This is the thematic leitmotif that runs through all chapters: the thwarted desire or the concrete attempt to realize one's own antimyth, one's counterlife. The various chapters tell of Zuckerman's imagining alternative existential trajectories for himself and his brother, their "mythological" pursuit of a stainless and innocent fresh start as someone different (C 322). Henry and Nathan seek the purest form of renewal: "fleeing now and back to day zero and the first untainted settlement—breaking history's mold and casting off the dirty, disfiguring reality of the piled-up years" (C 322). They abnegate the narrative they impersonated up until that moment in time, and they recompose themselves in a new story. If Nathan reimagines the religionless and sexed-up Henry as a devoted, sexless Judaist, the



libidinous Nathan reinvents himself as a family man. Their desire for change is what makes them human, and humanly interesting.

Needless to say, this focus on the fluid character of our identity derives from Roth's notion of the self. Since there is not a self immune to change, any impersonation is possible and acceptable. As Debra Shostak wrote,

The result of a singular self, an absence filled by a multiplicity of selves—of impersonations—is to deny priority to any single account of the self. Each role, each impersonation, counterself, or speculative narrative has the same claim to the truth as any other, because each emerges from the same “natural being” or “innate capacity.” (“Obsessive” 208)

Considering that any self we impersonate is as valid as any other, multiplicity—diachronic as well as synchronic—becomes a defining feature of the human character. While Henry, as most people, finds the need to find a coherent narrative for himself, Nathan's trajectory in this novel argues for the acceptance of contradiction, of the coexistence of antipodal subselves. In *The Counterlife*, Nathan's identity encompasses a variety of Nathans—the Hedonist and the Paterfamilias, the Obsessive Author and the Worn-Down Author, the American and the Expatriate, the disinterested Jew and the engaged Jew—that, more or less conflictually or more or less harmonically, coexist within the same body.

In “Gloucestershire,” Nathan Zuckerman is a writer who lives, at the same time, a double propulsion toward opposite directions. On the one hand, Zuckerman, in his mid-forties, finds himself sick with the whirlpool of his “myness,” to borrow a word from *Operation Shylock* (OS 8): “I was sick of old crises, bored with old issues, and wanted only to undo the habits with which I had chained myself to my desk, implicated three wives in my seclusion, and, for years on end, lived in the nutshell of self-scrutiny” (C 284). The desire to step outside the abyss of fiction and live the real thing, to contrive a different life for himself, happier and fuller, is born in the unconsummated affair with Maria. Maria gives Nathan the opportunity to imagine himself in an unknown situation, to change his story. The writer feels the need to explore his subjectivity under new terms, that is, to rewrite his narrative identity and make sense of himself in an impersonation opposite the present one. The pliant and intelligent young British woman sparks in Nathan Zuckerman—the hedonist writer who in *The Anatomy Lesson* has four lovers—the longing for the pastoral scenario of married life and a family. In “Gloucestershire,” Zuckerman's idyll with Maria and Phoebe, her daughter, is thwarted by his impotence. So intense is his hunger for this new self that he opts for the life-threatening operation that would make him regain sexual potency, crucial for the maintenance of

their relationship. Zuckerman dies during the operation. However, Nathan is driven at the same time toward the opposite direction: as Maria notes later on, during the affair “the obsessive reinvention of the real never stopped” (C 247). The dream of renewal, impossible because of his medical condition, is fully developed in fiction. According to what is said in “Gloucestershire,” Nathan spends the hours he is not with Maria imagining their family life in London, their house on Strand-on-the-Green, a picturesque street along the Thames, and their battle with English anti-Semitism. His longing for the real coexists with the persistent fictionalization. The aspiration to change his life from the one he spent at his desk is counterbalanced with a renovated dive into what he wants to escape: paradoxically, he manages to realize his desire for an existence not centered on writing only on the page. Zuckerman, however, does not refuse contradiction; he embraces it.

Another variation on this theme regards the differences in the Jewish identity of the individual in different geographic locales, a core question of *The Counterlife*.<sup>28</sup> In fact, depending on where Zuckerman is situated, the environmental forces shape the narrative of his Jewish identity. Since he has not a immutable self, he is not an immutable Jew. The novel places him in three locations—New York, Israel, London—in which he is three different Jews. In New York, Zuckerman addresses his Jewishness almost exclusively on the page, as a subject for fiction. In Israel, Nathan Zuckerman feels a repulsion toward Jewish tribalism and the paradigms of Jewish normality and abnormality in which he is pigeonholed different times during his visit. This situation is overturned in less than twenty-four hours when Zuckerman is in London. Faced with Christian liturgy and English anti-Semitism, Nathan clings to his Jewish identity: “It never fails. I am never more of a Jew than I am in a church when the organ beings” (C 256). Zuckerman summarizes this multiple Jewish identity in the phrase: “A Jew among Gentiles and a Gentile among Jews” (C 324). This paradoxical coexistence of this two opposite views on Jewishness is never more overt than in Nathan’s stance on the circumcision of his unborn child. In “Judea,” Shuki Elchanan brings up the question in conversation. While Shuki takes for granted that Nathan wants to circumcise his child, Nathan responds with skepticism. To Shuki, Nathan asks “ ‘Who says circumcision is required?’ ‘Genesis, chapter 17.’ ‘Shuki, I’ve never been completely sold on biblical injunctions’ ” (C 73). Nathan postpones the question, but in that context he implies a disinterest— if not an indirect refusal—in circumcising his child. The same day he returns from Israel, however, he sustains the very opposite. When Sarah Freshfield concludes her anti-Semitic rant during the buffet following the Christmas

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<sup>28</sup> *The Counterlife* is one of the two Philip Roth’s novels—the other being *Operation Shylock*—which deal directly with the Jewish identity. This is a very important theme in the novel, and the context of my work does not permit and in-depth analysis about this. However, Jewishness in *The Counterlife* has been a favorite perspective of scholars. For instance, Posnock reads Theodor Herzl’s presence in the novel. An interesting article on the subject is Derek Parker Royal’s “The Postmodern Jewish Identity in Philip Roth’s *The Counterlife*.”

carol by saying that her mother, Mrs. Freshfield, would not like opposition to the child's christening, Nathan is afraid of the possible implications of an ugly struggle between Maria and her mother about something that he retains "laughably absurd to contemplate" (C 283). This leads to a marital quarrel that threatens to break the couple apart; indeed, this marital quarrel is the starting point of the two final letters. In his, Nathan Zuckerman responds to the potential christening of the baby with a powerful arguing for circumcision: "Circumcision confirms that there is an us, and an us that isn't solely him and me" (C 324). The variations on the sort of Jew Nathan is are a further elaboration on the recurrent motif of transformation that runs through *The Counterlife*.

I do not believe we are all like the Nathan Zuckerman of *The Counterlife*.<sup>29</sup> The acceptance of contradiction is a risky psychological move, and the opposite of what is commonly assumed to be sanity. Most of us would have a hard time considering themselves in the multiplicity of their subjectivity. Nearly all of us behave like Henry, who makes sense of himself through a coherent narrative line. However, Henry's behavior neglects the reality of the creative endeavor embedded in living a life. In this novel, Nathan, on the other hand, is able to accept the manifoldness of the self because of his awareness of the role of storytelling in our lives.

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I have read *The Counterlife* four times, and have taken a considerable amount of notes; read extensive criticism that concentrates on the various aspect of this work; written about it in my thesis for my *laurea triennale* as well as in this occasion. However, I do not feel that my work on this novel is finished; it has just began. *The Counterlife* is an amazing reading experience. It astonished me the first time, and keeps astonishing me. In this novel, Roth's closest friends—"Sheer Playfulness and Dead Seriousness" (Oates 98)—work together until the very end to give a sublime picture of humanity. Yet it does not come easy. *The Counterlife* is one of those books one has to struggle with, because it does not only bites and stings, but it also throws its punches, it hammers its reader down if he is not up for the challenge. Yet, are not these books the great ones?

Kafka wrote to Oskar Pollack,

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<sup>29</sup> It is important to underline that, by and large, Zuckerman remains a rather stable and certainly recognizable character throughout most of his ten appearances. His manifoldness and multiplicity in *The Counterlife* is peculiar to this novel.

we ought to read only books that bite and sting us. If the book we are reading doesn't shake us awake like a blow on the skull, why bother reading it in the first place? So that it makes us happy, as you write? Good Lord, we could be happy precisely if we had no books, and the kind of books that makes us happy are the kind we could write ourselves if we had to. But we need the books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the ax for the frozen sea within us. (qtd. Medin 207).<sup>30</sup>

I cannot but agree.

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<sup>30</sup> This quote from a 1904 letter Kafka wrote to Oskar Pollak has always been a favorite of Roth's, a devotee and teacher of Kafka. It is partially quoted in *Zuckerman Unbound*.

*The Pillar of Instability*

Our ears, our minds, our mouths,  
are stuffed with personalities.

— Henry James, *Portrait of a Lady*

I admit that I have not read all of Philip Roth's books. I have yet to meet David Kepesh; of the period before *My Life as a Man*, I have read only the books I felt necessary (*Goodbye, Columbus* and *Portnoy's Complaint*); more recently, reviews and interviews put me off from *The Humbling*. One could say it is shameful for someone to write a long work of scholarship without having read all the author's oeuvre. I would agree, to a certain extent. The problem is that we are not talking of Ralph Ellison, F. Scott Fitzgerald, or J.D. Salinger; we are talking about a writer whose career, in terms of quantity (and not only), is more comparable to the one of Henry James.<sup>31</sup> Philip Roth has written thirty-one books: I have read two thirds of them, half of them more than twice, and, at twenty-six, I feel I have read little else. In my defense, when he reread all his work upon retirement, going backwards from *Nemesis*, Roth himself did not read them all. He stopped at *Portnoy*.

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<sup>31</sup> In order to quantify, one can look at the Library of America catalog. The volumes dedicated to Roth are nine, and he is second only to Henry James, who surpasses him with fifteen volumes. But the similarities between the two authors extend beyond quantity. Although one can be surprised by this, there are several points in common between the two. First of all, James was a big influence on Roth, and this can be traced in *Letting Go*, *The Ghost Writer*, and *The Prague Orgy*. I would draw a comparison also in their extensive periods spent abroad and the effect of their return to America. However, what is most interesting is that both are immensely interested in how the imaginary is present and concrete in our lives. Both deals extensively with "life's inherent artfulness," as Posnock (a scholar of both James and Roth) puts it (135). A quick example is how one could explain James's "The Jolly Corner" through the concept of counterlife: Spencer Brydon faces a ghost who embodies an imaginary outcome of his existence. Moreover, James is functional to Roth. Posnock notes how "Roth, the perennial 'bad boy' and the preeminent Jewish novelist of his generation, enters American high culture by appropriating James as crucial inspiration in his career-long assault on all that James is conventionally said to embody—the cultural and moral prestige of refinement, good taste, seriousness, maturity" (8).

One of the novels that I have first read only recently is *Operation Shylock*. It had loomed for years in my reading list, and about three years ago I bought the Library of America volume. The day it arrived at my house, it enchanted me in a reading spell: I spent the afternoon on it, reading the first sixty pages. How can a Roth aficionado detach oneself from a text where autobiography develops into the implausible? I was reading something else at the time. I managed to pick it up again only some months later, when I had a couple of eventless weeks before returning home from my semester in London. My expectations were not disappointed. Since the beginning, it appeared to me as the apogee of Roth's comedy: the writer "Philip Roth"<sup>32</sup> gets stuck in an inexplicable adventure where nothing is what it seems, among people who often impersonate someone they are not or seems to do so, in a place where deception and doubleness is at the heart of the day-to-day history. "Philip" gets involved in a comic escapade, where the fun of the grotesque and the improbable leads the way for a profound meditation on identity and on "the unsureness of everything" (OS 361); and no one ends up hurt. As Smilesburger says, "It's a comedy in the classic sense. He comes through it *all* unscathed" (OS 362).

*Operation Shylock*—subtitled *A Confession*—opens with "Philip Roth," a character identical to its author, who, in the aftermath of the Halcion-triggered breakdown of 1987,<sup>33</sup> learns via his cousin Apter and his friend, the writer Aharon Appelfeld, that there is man in Jerusalem, who goes around impersonating him at the Demjanjuk trial, and is promoting Diasporism—a relocation of the Ashkenazi Jews to their land of origin in Eastern Europe so as to avoid a second Holocaust by the hand of the Arabs. "Philip" goes to Jerusalem because of a planned interview with Appelfeld, but he finds himself pursuing the other Philip Roth. When the two meet after a session of the trial they both attend, "Philip" is both baffled by and angered with his double, who reveals to be a big fan of his. Their departure concludes with the double in tears and "Philip" laughing. Later on the same day, the double contacts "Philip" through his girlfriend, Wanda "Jinx" Possesski, a voluptuous nurse, who unsuccessfully tries to convince him of the double's crusade against anti-Semitism. She lets out that the double is terminally ill. During the following day, when "Philip" is mistaken for his double, his gift for playacting and his desire for comic revenge lead him to impersonate his enemy in several occasions. He first impersonates his double when, at the restaurant where he is

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<sup>32</sup> When one refers to Philip Roth in *Operation Shylock*, one has to make some distinctions. There are three Philip Roths in the novel: first, the author of the novel; second, the protagonist who bears the same name and the same biography of the author; third, the double of the protagonist whose name is also Philip Roth. This poses a referential problem. Which Philip am I referring to when I say Philip Roth? In order to make this clear, I refer to the author as Roth or Philip Roth; I refer to the protagonist as Philip, and I put the name between inverted commas; I refer to the double mainly as Moishe Pipik, the name that "Philip" gives him, or as double, impostor, or the other Philip Roth, which are the appellatives "Philip" uses in the novel.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Chapter 1, page 25.

interviewing Appelfeld, an old man approaches them and gives “Philip” a million-dollar check in support of Diasporism. Later the same day, at the Jerusalem market he meets a old college mate from the times at University of Chicago, George Ziad, a Palestinian professor living in Ramallah, turned angry and dogmatic by the territory. Ziad brings “Philip” to the West Bank: first to a trial of a young Palestinian, and then to dinner at his house. While at Ziad’s house he stops trying to correct his friend, and acts as if he were the Theodor Herzl of Diasporism. “Philip’s” impersonation does not stop even when an Israeli officer takes him to his hotel, after the army blocked the taxi supposed to take him back to Jerusalem. At the hotel, the other Philip Roth is waiting in his room. The two begin an acrimonious exchange where “Philip” demands from his double—whom the writer now starts calling Moishe Pipik—the true story, and Pipik claims the million-dollar check. Pipik tells “Philip” his story as a Jewish private investigator specialized in missing person cases in Chicago. Unable to believe the story, “Philip” throws him out of the room. Later that night, Jinx knocks at the door. Inside, she expresses to “Philip” her anxiety over Pipik. “Philip” obstinately asks her Pipik’s real story, but what he gets instead is an account of her life, in all her transformations. Once she told him something about Pipik’s background, Philip seduces her and leaves right after. “Philip” checks out of his hotel and goes to the one Pipik is staying, and checks in in Pipik’s former room. His inspection of the room is fruitless, except for a recording of an anti-Semites anonymous session. In the morning, David Supposnik is in the lobby of the hotel, waiting for “Philip.” Supposnik wants him to write an introduction to the diaries of Leon Klinghoffer, the victim of the *Achille Lauro* hijacking. As “Philip” and Supposnik talk, Ziad enters the hotel. The latter is there to say to “Philip” that he has contacts with Jewish sponsors of the PLO in Athens. As the two drive to the Demjanjuk trial, “Philip” explains to his old friend that his behavior of the day before was an act. At the end of the trial session, “Philip” is abducted by two men, and brought to an empty school. After waiting for hours trying to make sense of the situation, “Philip” is met by Smilesburger, a senior Mossad operative, and the man who gave him the million-dollar check the day before. After a lecture on the Jewish hatred toward the fellow Jews, Smilesburger asks “Philip” to pursue Ziad’s Athens contacts for an intelligence operation. The Epilogue takes place some years later. “Philip” claims that he did go to Athens for the Mossad, and just finished a memoir about his experience. He sent the manuscript to Smilesburger not so much to vet it as to authenticate the unbelievable story. “Philip” tells also how he tried to put at rest the inexplicable figure of Moishe Pipik: he imagined a letter by Jinx which tells their final months together, a letter to which he replies. In the end, “Philip” meets with Smilesburger in a New York deli. As a conclusion to their discussion about the novel, Smilesburger suggests “Philip” should drop the eleventh chapter, “Operation Shylock,” which

describes the operation, and append a note saying that the book is fiction. Smilesburger offers “Philip” money for this. “Philip” refuses to change anything, but the novel ends without the eleventh chapter and with the note.

Once *Operation Shylock* was published, it was reviewed as a novel, but in the interviews Roth insisted that he had not made his book up, that it was pure autobiography: “the book is true,” he said to the *New York Times* (Fein n.d.). The effort to make it appear so is remarkable: in order to tell such an implausible story, Roth had to stick as close as possible to the tangible reality. Like he did a decade later with *The Plot Against America*, he strengthened the mimetic impulse in a novel that deals overtly with the unbelievable reality by making himself the character of the novel, by making an unreal story happen to a real man. Roth shed the charade only years later—in 2000 he said “none of this seems like autobiography to me. It seems like fiction” (Remnick, “Clear” 80)—but the denial does not clear up the confusion created by the blurring of life and artifice.

While on a superficial level Roth’s pretense of the novel’s veracity can be intended as a joke to Roth’s autobiographical readers,<sup>34</sup> it continues the thematic core of *Operation Shylock*, a novel which makes of the instability of the real an ontological fact, a distinctive feature of everyone’s reality. Since the beginning, the main trajectory of the novel is “Philip’s” attempt to sort himself out within a series of events that would make much more sense in a fictional context rather than in a factual one. This journey of distinction between the real and the invented starts from the premise of the 1987 breakdown, whose inexplicable psychological destruction left Roth undone, and uncertain of what his life had in hold for him, uncertain of what is real and what is not for months after the medical recovery. Needless to say that this does not help him in his Jerusalem trip. The people he encounters—except for Aharon Appelfeld—possess conflicting identities: most of them wear multiple masks, deceitfully impersonate people they are not, behave in ways that are incomprehensible and unintelligible. Identification evades “Philip” constantly: his main difficulty resides in creating a credible narrative that would make sense of Pipik, Jinx, Ziad, Smilesburger, and Demjanjuk. If at the start “Philip” is perplexed and angry and tries to force a solution to the question of his double, later he becomes the primary actor in this game of impersonations. This incredible plot against him gives him the occasion to succumb “at long last to a basic law of my existence, to the instinct for impersonation by which I had so far enacted and energized my contradictions solely within the realm of fiction” (OS 328). “Philip” becomes another member of

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<sup>34</sup> In an interview he said, “when I wrote *Portnoy’s Complaint*, everybody was sure it was me, but I told them it wasn’t. When I wrote *The Ghost Writer* everybody was sure it was me, but I said none of these things ever happened to me. I never met a girl who looked like Anne Frank. I didn’t have some nice writer take me into his house. I made it all up. And now when I tell the truth, they all insist that I made it up. I tell them, ‘Well, how can I make it up since you’ve always said I am incapable of making anything up?’ I can’t win!” (Fein n.d.)



the cast of mutable characters: in his ludic impersonations of the father of Diasporism, he becomes inexplicable to himself. Yet this game is counterweighted by his human desire for comprehension: throughout the novel, “Philip” tries ceaselessly to make sense of what he is experiencing, but he does not manage to settle on a clear explanation of the events. Never does he—or the reader with him—get out of the realm of duplicity and uncertainty, and, in order to make sense of all those days in Jerusalem (and of the untold “Operation Shylock”), he has to write this book. But the “inculcation of pervasive uncertainty” is not something that is limited to the novelist in extraordinary circumstances; as Smilesburger says, “that’s a permanent, irrevocable crisis that comes with living, wouldn’t you say?” (OS 362)

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In the scholarship about *Operation Shylock*—remarkably slighter than the one on *The Counterlife* or on the American trilogy—I have not yet found an interesting comment on something that “Philip” makes at the beginning of the Epilogue. He says that Smilesburger’s request that he read how the writer exploited his adventure on paper “was made some two and a half years before I even decided to embark on this nonfictional treatment rather than to plumb the idea in the context, say, of a Zuckerman sequel to *The Counterlife*” (OS 328). There is not a clear-cut way to interpret this, but I cannot see it if not as Roth’s reinforcing the ties between the two novels. Indeed, this is a Roth book, the other is a Zuckerman book. But why, then, mention *The Counterlife* in such way if not to foreground how, although not following the same characters, *Operation Shylock* is irrefutably its thematic sequel? *Operation Shylock* is Roth’s return to the power of *The Counterlife* and its inventiveness, a pursuit of the same existential conceptions, a continuation of his interest in the relation between language and reality, another investigation on the indeterminacy and the multifariousness of the individual subjectivity.

The first couple of pages of Zuckerman’s concluding letter of *The Counterlife* are a handbook on the duplicity and uncertain identification of the characters in *Operation Shylock*. In fact, the notion of self is persistent: almost all characters of *Operation Shylock* encompasses multiple, often contradictory personalities, and the core being is ever-elusive, nothing but an illusory and unstable fiction about ourselves that serves as guidance for our ever-shifting impersonations. In front of his inability to make sense of George Ziad—whose story is not dissimilar from Henry Zuckerman’s in

“Judea”—“Philip” says:

His life couldn't seem to merge with anyone's anywhere no matter what drastic experiment in remodeling he tried. Amazing, that something as tiny, really, as a self should contain contending subselves—and that these subselves should themselves be constructed of subselves, and on and on and on. And yet, even *more* amazing, a grown man, an educated adult, a full professor, who seeks *self-integration!* (OS 138)

The Halcion breakdown—a real event that affected Roth, not only “Philip”—and the appearance of Moishe Pipik initiate a meditation on self-divisiveness within the protagonist. However, his trip to Jerusalem—purposely undertaken to “escape the subjectivist whirlpool of a breakdown” by interviewing a writer whose biography is imbued with the unimaginable factuality of the Holocaust (OS 101)—turns into a frolicsome journey into the intricacies of his subjectivity. The unsought encounters with the other self-divided characters—Pipik, Jinx, Ziad, Smilesburger, Demjanjuk—are theoretically functional to this meditation, since as Shostak says, “it is the peculiar nature of the subject that it can exist only in a binary relationship to the other, that ‘self’ and ‘other’ are conceptually and even ontologically interdependent” (“Diaspora” 734-5). “Philip’s” recovery is not only enlivened but defined in the contrast with the other selves he meets, and his own forays into mischievous impersonation contribute to his inquisition about what is and what constructs an identity. The self lives in its impulse toward otherness, and man lives in the “universal urge to be otherwise” (OS 161). As Kauvar effectively sums up, “however ambivalent, however splintered, however problematic, the self as Roth envisages it and as he imagines it, thrives in multiple forms and thrives precisely because of their conflicting impulses and clashing encounters” (Kauvar 443).

*Operation Shylock* does not deal with this concept as overtly as *The Counterlife* does; however, it expands notably on the relationship between the self and its perception, and between its perception and the narrative form. The events at the center of *Operation Shylock* do not have a logical explanation, they appear concretely surreal, pieces of an incomprehensible puzzle. Who is Pipik? What kind of man did George Ziad turn into? How did “Philip” get mixed up in this implausible plot? Throughout the novel, “Philip” makes several attempts to make the inexplicable explicable by imagining a story that would link the various events logically, preferably in cause/effect relations. Several are the instances in which “Philip” tries to impose a narrative on what is happening to him, and, as a consequence, to create a sense of himself within a puzzling situation. For instance, just before arriving at the Ziads’, “Philip” meditates on what life could have led his old college friend to such transformation, attempting to figure out the reason of such radical change: “it *was* remorse that, if not alone in determining the scale of this harsh transformation, intensified

the despair that polluted everything and had made hyperbole standard fare for George, too. [...] Unless, of course, it was all an act” (OS 139). An example more to the point is when “Philip” is abducted by Mossad agents and made sit in an empty classroom. In the three hours he waits, he cannot relent from imagining any possible narrative explanation of his kidnapping: first, he thinks that it is brought out by an Israeli force; then, he attributes it to Moishe Pipik. “Philip” mentally rewrites the story of his present moment in order to assimilate it, to understand something that seems to have no possible meaning. However, these are minor instances if compared to the opening of the eighth chapter, “The Uncontrollability of Real Things.” Its first line—“Here is the Pipik plot so far” (OS 218)—is followed by a six-page, objective and detached summary of the events that tie “Philip Roth” and his double together.

When I first came upon these pages, I was not sure what to make of them, since I had never seen a longish summary in the middle of a novel. Needless to say, it is not for the pleasure of the reader that Roth spends so many words to recapitulate the events. The reason for this narrative survey is that “Philip” needs to give himself an ordered structure that would help him make sense of not only that implausible set of facts, but also of himself within the situation. The narrative is functional to the apprehension of his self in a given context. However, the preposterousness of the circumstances prevents “Philip” to get hold of such reality. This becomes overly menacing for his already feeble self-awareness, and thus the writer decides to emulate Maria in *The Counterlife* and to attempt an escape from such narrative.

Suitcase in hand, tiptoeing so as not to disturb her [Jinx] postcoital rest, he himself slips silently out of the plot on the grounds of its general implausibility, a total lack of gravity, reliance at too many key points on unlikely coincidence, an absence of inner coherence, and not even the most tenuous evidence of anything resembling a serious meaning or purpose. The story so far is frivolously plotted, overplotted, for his taste altogether too freakishly plotted, with outlandish events so wildly careening around every corner that there is nowhere for intelligence to establish a foothold and develop a perspective. (OS 223)

Not being able to apprehend the bizarre reality, “Philip” cannot establish a stand for himself within it. The flight, however not perfected, represents “Philip’s” need to rely on a narrative that would defy the chaos and offer a secure hold on the real. In front of such crazily incoherent and perversely outré situation, this is what anyone would seek.

The narrative does not work because of the lack of causality. Simple juxtaposition does not offer any valuable connection. Indeed, the primary object in explaining something is to establish why it came to effect. The awareness of the reason permits the connection between one event to

another, and then compose a story about it: this thing happened because of that, and as a consequence this other thing took place, and so on. But what if we stumble on an event that does not have any explanation, an event that does not have relation to another, such as Moishe Pipik for “Philip”? Is all that happens to us understandable in casual terms? These questions create a crucial tension in the novel that runs along the dichotomy Freudian versus Jungian. During the first meeting between “Philip” and Pipik, the latter criticizes the original by saying:

You have a Freudian belief in the sovereign power of causality. Causeless events don't exist in your universe. To you things that aren't thinkable in intellectual terms aren't worth thinking about. A lot of smart Jews are like that. Things that aren't thinkable in intellectual terms don't even exist. [...] You and I defy causal explanation. [...] Read a little Jung, Philip, if only for your piece of mind. ‘The uncontrollability of real things’—Carl Jung knows all about it. [...] You look stupefied—without a causal explanation you are lost. (OS 68-9).

In this respect, we are all a bit Freudian. Apprehension depends on causality, but causality depends on our imagination to tie one thing to the other. But reality is not so easily explicable. As Roth wants to convey, there are many things that are unimaginable. How can “Philip”—and Roth—comprehend the Halcion disaster? How can one, as “Philip” discusses with Appelfeld, apprehend the infinite horror of the Holocaust? Indeed, “reality can permit itself to be unbelievable, inexplicable, out of all proportion” (S 28). Yet our sanity depends heavily on a reality that has to be believable, explicable, proportionate. If this is not immediate, we have to recur to expedients for the comprehension of the ever-original reality. By having “Philip” constantly looking for a narrative that would expound the unbelievable events that occur in the novel, Roth dramatizes the constant clash between our need for a narratively accessible reality and the “uncontrollability of real things” (OS 69).

This discourse of the narrative perception of the real and the idea of the fluid self come together fully in several characters in *Operation Shylock*. Most of the actors of this novel encompass a complex narrative of multiple selves, ever-changing, hold together by the current impersonation which mold all the previous ones. “Philip” is the first one who is trying to get hold of his subjectivity, but some of *Operation Shylock*'s best moments occur in the company of minor characters. Cousin Apter, Wanda Jane “Jinx” Possesski, Smilesburger, John Demjanjuk, Demjanjuk's son, Eliyahu Rosenberg (a witness of the Demjanjuk trial)—all are metamorphic beings that construct their lives in a ever-shifting narrative, all are wonderful examples of human beings.

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I love to imagine Aharon Appelfeld and “Philip Roth” at the Ticho House, a nice restaurant in an old building in Jerusalem where Appelfeld goes every day to write. Their interview has a feel of literary dreaminess: two authors, one the direct opposite of the other, discussing one’s novels with respect to his biography, reality, memory, and the Holocaust. I cannot imagine a more beautiful job, and “Philip” would probably agree with this. Their conversations are intense and profound, intelligent and insightful. During their first encounter at dinner, “Philip,” worried about his double going around in Jerusalem, sits silently, listening to a story Aharon tells him. The story concerns a Frenchwoman, a university professor in Paris, married and with children, who as a new-born baby was abandoned in a churchyard in 1944, only months before the capital was liberated by the Allies. Raised by Catholic foster parents, only lately she had come to believe she was the child of a Jewish couple hiding during the war. This conviction arose as she defended Israeli foreign policy during the First Lebanon war against all family and friends. She contacted Appelfeld, whom she knew only by his books, and, soon afterwards, she paid him an unexpected visit in Jerusalem. There she asked him to find a rabbi because she wanted to convert: she felt like she had never belonged to France, and the reason was that she was a Jew—or, of this, she was full-heartedly convinced. Since the rabbis they go to see refuses to convert her, she is declared a Jew by the Appelfelds at the dinner table. “Philip’s” reaction to this story is quite interesting.

Doesn’t it occur to the professor that she may have been left in a churchyard precisely because she was *not* Jewish? And that her sense of apartness originates not in her having been born a Jew but in her having been orphaned and raised by people other than her natural parents? Besides, would a Jewish mother be likely to abandon her infant on the very eve of the liberation, when the chances for Jewish survival couldn’t have been better? No, no, to have been found when she was found makes Jewish percentage for this woman the *least* likely possibility. (OS 44-5)

Since my first reading of *Operation Shylock*, I have always had a particular fondness for this sketch about the Frenchwoman. Not only does it show Roth’s ability to encapsulate a lifetime in two pages, but also it perfectly epitomizes the narrative perception of the fluid self. For decades, this woman perceives herself within the biography of the orphaned Catholic girl. Then, in the wake of

fierce political debate, she begins providing new answers to a mystery of her life—that is, the identity of her parents. She convinces herself that they were Jews, and a new biography begins to take shape and make more sense to her: she reconstructs her life starting from this new—arguably plausible, yet not at all real—premise of a different ethnic belonging. No longer a Catholic girl, but a lost Jewish girl. A life-long feeling of alienation is addressed through a narrative reformulation of her identity. Her basis for this reinterpretation is, to say the least, feeble, but enough to prompt an evaluation of her life, to see herself and her biography under a new light. “Philip’s” reaction condenses what Roth does in his fiction: he takes this self-evident fact of the narrative construction of an identity, and casts doubts on the plausibility of such narrative, foregrounding the fictional component of such identity. Isn’t this story an eloquent demonstration of how “the treacherous imagination is everybody’s maker” (C 147)?

This story stops here, but *Operation Shylock* goes on dealing with the same questions this little story generates. The Frenchwoman’s story is, to some extent, almost every character’s story—after all, this is every man’s story. Most actors in the novel are examples of the instability of the biography of the self: each fabricates or aims at finding a story that can explain the self each is currently impersonating. As the Kierkegaardian epigraph suggests, each character’s “existence is surely a debate” (OS 5). Space does not allow me to illustrate this about all the characters in which I find this pertinent; I will thus focus on three of them in which this aspect is particularly interesting: “Philip Roth,” Wanda Jane “Jinx” Possesski, and John Demjanjuk.

*Operation Shylock* is, first of all, a novel about an identity in trouble—“Philip’s.” The starting point of this novel is the Halcion breakdown of 1987. While Philip writes only a few lines about it in the opening letter of *The Facts*,<sup>35</sup> *Operation Shylock* goes much deeper: it presents a detailed picture of a man disintegrating, unrecognizable to himself, anxious and paranoid, hallucinating and desperate, who does not kill himself only not to hurt his father. Talking about that period, he writes, “ ‘Where is Philip Roth?’ I asked aloud. ‘Where did he go?’ I was not speaking histrionically. I asked because I wanted to know” (OS 14). Although he manages to come out of this breakdown, “Philip’s” identity is in shambles. He is still very vulnerable, afraid of what happened to him, uncertain of his recovery, still detached from the man he was before the surgery. In the fall of 1987, Roth began what would become *The Facts*, which, in its inception, is nothing but Roth’s narrative

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<sup>35</sup> An interesting question is how to identify the Philip Roth in the other Roth novels. *Patrimony* aims at autobiography, and Philip, in the role of Herman’s son, seems to be an accurate portrait of the real man. This can be said of *The Facts* as well, but problems start to arise, especially about the concerns Zuckerman expresses in the final letter. A reader can infer little about how accurate (and inaccurate) the Philip of *Deception* is, and this can be said of *Operation Shylock* as well. One might not be correct if he considers Philip Roth to be the same coherent character throughout these four books.

reconnection with his identity as a writer, but this does not happen to “Philip.” In *Operation Shylock*, “Philip” relies on his interview with Appelfeld, a man who recovered from the worst catastrophe of the twentieth century, to put an end to such horrible period of his life.

I had chosen Aharon and talking to him as the final way out, the means by which to repossess that part of myself that I thought was lost, the part that was able to discourse and to think and that had simply ceased to exist in the midst of the Halcion wipeout when I was sure that I’d never be able to use my mind again. Halcion had destroyed not merely my ordinary existence, which was bad enough, but whatever was special to me as well, and what Aharon represented was someone whose maturation had been convulsed by the worst possible cruelty and who had managed nonetheless to reclaim his ordinariness *through* his extraordinariness, someone whose conquest of futility and chaos and whose rebirth as a harmonious human being and a superior writer constituted an achievement that, to me, bordered on the miraculous, all the more so because it arose from a force in him utterly invisible to the naked eye. (OS 46-7)

“Philip’s” aim in the trip to Jerusalem—and in the novel—is to regain possession of his existence, the ordinary and the extraordinary; to reenter within the boundaries of his narrative identity, in all its metamorphoses; to get hold of the man and the writer he once was.

If “Philip’s” trip to Jerusalem in January 1988 had gone well—as I suppose it more or less did for Roth—there would not be a novel about it. The appearance of Moishe Pipik sets a threat to “Philip’s” feeble recovery: the writer is struck hard by the uncanny identity theft by the hand of his double, so much so that he chooses to take the matter into his own hands rather than delegating it to lawyers. This decision conveys that the double elicits from “Philip” a direct response in defense of himself. Moishe Pipik constitutes a violation of “Philip’s” narrative self, a misappropriation of his personal history, an unacceptable distortion of who he claims to be. The confrontation with the impostor provides “Philip” with the occasion to define himself in opposition. Whereas there is some similitude between “Philip’s” work as a novelist and Pipik’s as an investigator, the double stands as the direct antithesis of “Philip”: he is a tough man, living in the world of facts, a former Chicago-based private investigator of murders and missing-person cases, the fighter of anti-Semitism, the founder of Diasporism, while “Philip” is a man of letters, whose life consists of sitting alone in a room all day creating people out of thin air, and whose books were accused of fomenting anti-Semitism. As Debra Shostak says, “*in the world* selves depend on other for their fullness of being” (“Disapora” 735). This is what Moishe Pipik is to “Philip”: the nemesis that defines who he is not, and, as a consequence, permits him to reconnect with his subjectivity. The direct face-off with his inexplicable double becomes a quest for reassertion of the self “Philip” is striving to

recover, for regaining control of the name—and the signified of such name—that Pipik has plagiarized.

The extraordinary circumstances lead “Philip” to extraordinary behavior. Soon in the novel, he responds to Moishe Pipik’s violation of his identity by violating in turn Moishe Pipik’s identity. At the Ticho House with Smilesburger, in the West Bank with George Ziad, with the Israeli officer named Gal on the way back to Jerusalem, he impersonates the Philip Roth Moishe Pipik created, the founder of Diasporism. In becoming “the other to the other,”<sup>36</sup> not only does he commit a pure act of revenge, but also he manages to enliven the basic process at the heart of his professional self, the animating core of his myriad fictional transformations—namely, impersonation. Even though in certain moments the chaotic adventure induces a nostalgic stance in “Philip,” and a return to the “life before impersonation and imitation and twofoldedness set in”— “I left the front stoop on Leslie Street,” he says, “ate the fruit of of the tree of fiction, and nothing, neither reality nor myself, had been the same since” (OS 198)—this mischievous imitation of the double is a counterpunch to the threat Moishe Pipik poses to “Philip’s” self. With this playful cannibalization of his double, he takes again authorial control on what occurs to the man under the name Philip Roth. By exerting his supremacy on the narrative of his nemesis, “Philip” not only counteracts his double’s uncontrollability, but also starts regaining control of his own narrative and affirming the pre-breakdown identity. His ludic subversion of the double’s fake Philip Roth signals the affirmation of the recovery from the mental disintegration of 1987. At the end of the summary that opens “The Uncontrollability of Real Things,” “Philip” says,

It would be comforting to understand his performances in Ramallah with George and in the jeep with Gal [...] as the triumph of a plucky, spontaneous, audacious vitality over paranoia and fear, as a heartening manifestation of an artist’s inexhaustible playfulness and of an irrepressibly comic fitness for life. It would be comforting to think that those episodes encapsulate whatever true freedom of spirit is his, that embodied in the impersonation is the distinctively personal form that his fortitude takes and that he has no reason at this stage of his life to be bewildered by or ashamed of. (OS 224-5)

It would not only be comforting; it is so. It is in “Philip’s” various impersonations of his double—from the innocuous one at the Ticho House where he accepts the million-dollar check to the full-fledged impersonation for the Mossad in the untold Operation Shylock in Athens—that he gradually recovers from the Halcion meltdown, and returns to the narrative “Philip Roth” was before the

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<sup>36</sup> From the Roth unprocessed papers in the Library of Congress: from folder marked “Second Draft,” in notes titled “The Interrogation Scene,” p. 3. Quoted in Debra Shostak’s “The Diaspora Jew and the ‘Instinct for Impersonation’: Philip Roth’s *Operation Shylock*.” p. 735.



spring of 1987. It is through those performances that he manages to rediscover what the sleeping pill had destroyed, that is, “not merely my ordinary existence, [...] but whatever was special to me as well” (OS 46)—that something special being nothing else but his “irrepressibly comic fitness for life” that he demonstrates in his impersonations (OS 224). This is the main trajectory that *Operation Shylock* tracks: a journey of re-appropriation of the destroyed and violated narrative identity of the protagonist.

The narrative perception of the fluid self, however, is even more evident in a minor character, Wanda Jane “Jinx” Possesski. Roth dedicates to her story a whole chapter, “Her Story.” She goes to see “Philip” at his hotel at night, only a few hours after Moishe Pipik left the room, and he lets her in only in exchange for the truth about the double. After a acrimonious discussion and a phone call to Pipik, she lets herself go on the bed and falls asleep from exhaustion. “Philip” falls asleep on his chair. When they wake up, he yields to his career-long interest in troubled women and asks her how she is “fucked-up” (OS 205). Her story begins there. Needless to say, her portrait is in narrative form, since such is the human means for self-presentation. Jinx’s identity consists of the narrative she presents to “Philip.” Her story is particularly interesting because it is emblematic for the discourse on impersonations that begins with *The Counterlife*. In fact, in this point in time her story is coherent, but presents a woman who in her life incarnates one different woman after another: first, a little girl brought up Catholic in a family described as “low-class. Beer-drinking. Fighting. Stupid people” (OS 205); second, the hippie adolescent, hitchhiking and smoking marijuana; third, the religious girl, with her twelve-year stint with the “Jesus people,” devoted to God and completing basic education (OS 206); fourth, the oncologic nurse, and the woman rediscovering sexuality; fifth, a profoundly anti-Semitic nurse; sixth, the girlfriend of the founder of Diasporism and Anti-Semites Anonymous. Not only is this a clear example on how we rely on narratives to present ourselves, but also this epitomizes the concept of the fluidity of the self: one’s irreducible self is the ability to change form and become a different human being, independently from the past impersonations. While not everybody changes selves with Jinx’s profusion and radicalness, Roth demonstrates that this is a fundamental human trait: at twenty-six, I myself can count at least three of such phases. However, such fluidity has to be counterbalanced by order, an order which is created by the narrative of the self, a narrative that is coherent with the last of those impersonations. Jinx’s approach to her twelve years with the “Jesus people” exemplifies this (OS 206). First, she finds a casual link in her passage from the hippie phase to the religious one: “Because of who my parents were. I got very little attention at home. None. So walking into a place where suddenly I’m a star, everybody loves me and wants me, how could I resist?” (OS 206). Second, Pipik’s girlfriend

reinterprets the young devotee, and judges that period as steeped in “craziness” and “stupidity,” which is not the way she must have seen it twelve years earlier (OS 211). Her narrative is diverse and goes in many different directions, but it does not allow contradiction. In the minor sketch of Jinx’s life, Roth realizes perfectly, in concrete detail and remarkable economy, his ontological stance on subjective identity: a fluid entity hold together by a artificially coherent narrative.

Reading interviews, profiles, and criticism, I first approached *Operation Shylock* with the conviction that it was, in great part, about Philip Roth’s involvement in the Demjanjuk trial. It was to my surprise that I discovered that this topic holds a place not as central as I thought. However, it is an important trajectory of the novel. As Debra Shostak says, “the trial poses the problem of how one is to construe fragments of evidence with multiple possible meanings and intentions” (“Diaspora” 734). The objective of the trial is to establish a coherent narrative line that would permit identification: is John Demjanjuk, the Detroit autoworker, the sadistic guard at Treblinka and Sobibor, Ivan the Terrible? Both the defense and the prosecutors are trying to fabricate a consistent story-line out of the unreliable pieces of information they have. In the end, the Demjanjuk trial is a battle for the most reliable narrative composition that would explain the evidence and the counter-evidence, the testimony of the survivors as well as the scant papers that tend to contradict the testimony. It is a trial about a narrative effort aimed at confirming or denying a contradictory existence. In fact, Demjanjuk’s great defense is his post-war life, a tranquil and ordinary life as a church-going family man in Detroit. Inevitably, “Philip” sees this as yet another example of how “radical change is the law of life,” of how one man can be one thing and its very opposite (C 312). Convinced that Demjanjuk is guilty, “Philip” embraces the defendant’s contradiction: Demjanjuk managed to live his sadistic life and his mundane counterlife without many problems. To “Philip’s” eyes, the alleged camp guard is nothing but a confirmation of the protean nature of the self. In a memorable passage, mentally speaking directly to Demjanjuk, “Philip” says,

Because you are. Because your appearance proves only that to be both a loving grandfather and a mass murderer it not all that difficult. It’s because you could do both well that I can’t stop staring at you. Your lawyers may like to think otherwise but this admirably unimportant American life of yours is your *worst* defense—that you’ve been so wonderful in Ohio at living your little, dull life is precisely what makes you so loathsome here. You’ve really only lived sequentially the two seemingly antipodal, mutually excluding lives that the Nazis, with no strain to speak of, managed to enjoy simultaneously—so what, in the end, is the big deal? The Germans proved definitively to all the world that to maintain two radically divergent personalities, one very nice and one not so nice, is no longer the prerogative of psychopaths only. The mystery isn’t that you, who had the time of your life in Treblinka, went on to become an amiable, hardworking American

nobody but that those who cleaned the corpses out for you, your accusers here, could ever pursue anything resembling the run-of-the-mill after what was done to them by the likes of you—that *they* can manage run-of-the-mill lives, *that's* what's unbelievable! (OS 53-4)

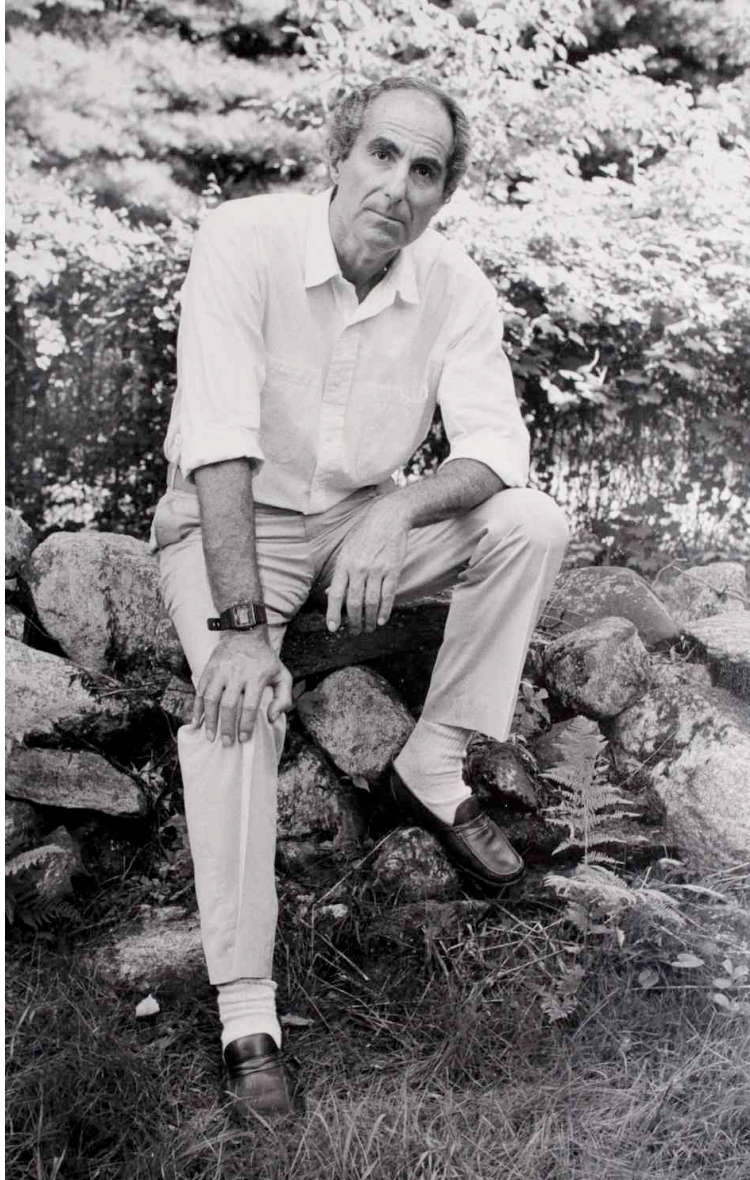
The trajectories of “Philip,” Jinx, and John Demjanjuk delineate the nature of selfhood, according to Philip Roth. The juxtaposition of the stories of these three characters conveys not only Roth’s persistence in exploring the multiplicity of the subjective individuality and its dependency on the narrative form, but also the countless possible variations that such theme can sustain. The focus might be more on the need for coherency or on the metamorphic nature of the self, but infallibly Roth tries to show us what the life of the self is, be it that of a renowned writer, that of an oncologic nurse, that of a mass-murderer, that of an English student, that of anybody else—we are shifting stories.

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Despite being a PEN/Faulkner winner, *Operation Shylock* had the misfortune of a lukewarm reception at publication. In the *New Yorker*, Updike concluded his unenthusiastic review saying that “it should be read by anyone who care about (1) Israel and its repercussions, (2) the development of postmodern, deconstruction-minded novel, (3) Philip Roth” (nd); others, such as Harold Bloom in the *New York Review of Book*, were far more approving. Fortunately, it has regained some momentum: for instance, it has appeared in the survey conducted by the *New York Times* entitled “What Is the Best Work of American Fiction of the Last 25 Years?” I have come to it fairly late, but it did not take long to understand that it is one of Roth’s most ambitious and successful novels. In Roth’s oeuvre, it ranks among his great achievements with *American Pastoral*, *Sabbath’s Theater*, *The Human Stain*, *The Counterlife*, and *The Ghost Writer*. Much more can be said about *Operation Shylock*, and I hope to set to work on it in my future. In order to have a focused approach, I deliberately avoided coping with the historical issues at play as well as the pervasive Jewish themes (I dare say that this is Roth’s most Jewish novel); I barely touched on its structure, the subtle play between facts and fiction, and the many Philip Roth’s; and where was I supposed to talk about the little splendid details, such as “Philip’s” reliance on his memories of the summers at the Jersey shore with his brother in order to getting through the night during the Halcion breakdown?

*Operation Shylock* would be worth a broad approach, and much more attention, because it is a plentiful and brilliant novel.

As I have demonstrated, *Operation Shylock* is rooted in the same territory of *The Counterlife*, making it an indirect sequel. They are both masterpieces in their own right, but it is together that they gather a remarkable energy, and in their resonating with each other they provide an unparalleled perspective on something crucial about our humanity. Together they raise the fundamental question: what is the self? Together they investigate the multiplicity of the human character, how each and everyone of us ends up impersonating different human beings in one single lifetime. Together they look into how much we rely on the narrative form to comprehend and explain the intricacies of the self. Together they display how much we stand like authors to ourselves, the imaginative commanders of the story we are. Together they stand not only in Roth's career, but also in twentieth century literature as enduring pictures about the meaning of the mystery of the individual subjectivity.



## THE BANKRUPTCY OF “THE BUSINESS OF OTHER PEOPLE”

*An Astonishing Farce of Misperception*

And observing is completing and we are content,  
In a world that shrinks to an immediate whole,

That we do not need to understand, complete  
Without secret arrangements of it in the mind.

—Wallace Stevens, “Description Without Place”

The sort of books that Philip Roth wrote over his fifty-odd year career—with their piercing impertinence, their transgressive audacity, their stoic fervor, with their “sheer playfulness” and their “deadly seriousness” (Oates 98)—have divided rather than united his audience. More than once, his readers were unprepared to accept Roth’s unrestrained openness in depicting reality—you are not

reading *The Hobbit*, that is for sure. For him, “literature isn’t a moral beauty contest,” and perhaps, some readers have not liked this (Lee 212). The evaluations of his books, his characters, and his own person have often been polarized. From the start of his career to the announced end, the public outrage and discontent that his work elicited was also directed, because of the autobiographical misreading of his novels, to the author himself, making him the most misconstrued of his characters. If, in 1959, at the publication of “Defender of the Faith,” his first story in the *New Yorker*, the Jewish community accused him of being a self-hating Jew, about the time he stopped writing novels, in 2011, a judge resigned from the International Man Booker jury that would award him the prize because, in her opinion, “Roth digs brilliantly into himself, but little else is there” (Calill nd). In the press as well as among certain circles of readers, clichés about Roth have abounded and continues to abound: a narcissist, a misogynist, a hysteric, a pervert. Those critics and readers, the likes of Delphine Roux in *The Human Stain*, believe they know. To them, the logic seems impeccable. To them, *I Married a Communist* is Roth’s literary retaliation for Claire Bloom’s memoir, *Leaving a Doll’s House*. To them, all he is writing about is himself. Who is he writing about with Portnoy, Tarnopol, Kepesh, Zuckerman, and Sabbath otherwise? To them, his repellent, narcissistic books are pure autobiography. This is the most enduring banalization about Roth. I cannot understand how he did not get tired to respond to interviewers about this. One of his most memorable response was the following.

If all these subtle readers can see in my work is my biography, then they are simply numb to fiction—numb to impersonation, to ventriloquism, to irony, numb to the thousand observations of human life on which a book is built, numb to all the delicate devices by which novels create the illusion of a reality more like the real than our own. End of lecture. (Hamilton 192)

Although Roth saw the pictures the public had of him as a mundane occurrence,<sup>37</sup> this misreading has been a burden he has struggled to bear. The friction created by these trivializing projections was not without consequences—comic as well as tragic. Roth moved to the countryside because in New York, upon the publication of *Portnoy’s Complaint*, he was recognized in the streets and remarked upon— “Stop doing that, Portnoy!” one man shouted at him.<sup>38</sup> On a more somber note, the exhaustion with the persistence in the press of those clichés, especially in the response to *Operation*

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<sup>37</sup> To Joyce Carol Oates, he once said that “defying a multitude of bizarre projections, or submitting to them, would seem to me at the heart of everyday living in America, with its ongoing demand to be something palpable and identifiable” (Oates 90).

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Interview with Olav Brenner, *Bokprogrammet*, NRK.

*Shylock*, was among the things that led to the upheaval of 1993.<sup>39</sup> And yet, once we dismantle these falsified portraits of the artist, once we try to avoid any possible preconception, what can we know about Philip Roth? Who is the man behind the books? Ideally, as Faulkner once said, “the artist is of no importance. Only what he creates is important, since there is nothing new to be said” (“Art” 35). Indeed, the artist’s truest identity is in his works. And yet, which reader can forget about the author? What reader can forget about Roth? I wonder regularly about the authors I am reading, about what led them to write such novel or story, about their own life and stories—Roth is no exception. I have often fantasized about him, making my own distortions and idealizations, and have looked for information about the private occurrences, the personal traits, the biographical details that might illuminate him anew. In wait of Blake Bailey’s biography, what can one do? The point is that such effort, however, is doomed to be a failure, since the principle that informs it is wrong. Our curiosity is met with the bottomlessness of our ignorance, and our assumptions are nothing but “a cast of the imagination, made in sound,” borrowing Wallace Stevens’s words (302). Who can get someone right—Philip Roth or anybody else?

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Biographical events, however, can shed light on artistic shifts. In 1993, “*Roth had suffered a serious illness, followed by the dissolution of his marriage to Claire Bloom,*” as Roth’s friend, Benjamin Taylor, resumed (Bellow 499). It is after this critical moment in Roth’s private life that his serious comedy gives way to his great tragedies. The four novels that come afterwards are often regarded as his best: *Sabbath’s Theater*, *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, and *The Human Stain*. Whereas Roth does not become a completely different writer—in fact, one can see how the author continues to investigate some of his preceding themes, such as the ones I am trying to elucidate—his mood changes radically. Even more than his thematic concentration on mortality, Roth assumes an unprecedented nihilistic attitude toward life. If *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock* delved into the realm of possibilities and life’s mutability in ludic terms, *Sabbath’s Theater* and the

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. Chapter 1 p. 33 and David Remnick’s “Into the Clear,” p. 88.



American trilogy are grounded in the inescapable wrongness of human endeavors. The founding principle of what we might dub the Madamaskian<sup>40</sup> quartet is the human stain.

*That's how it is*—in her own dry way, this is all Faunia was telling the girl feeding the snake: we leave a stain, we leave a trail, we leave our imprint. Impurity, cruelty, abuse, error, excrement, semen—there's no other way to be here. Nothing to do with disobedience. Nothing to do with grace or salvation or redemption. It's in everyone. Indwelling. Inherent. Defining. The stain that is there before its mark. Without the sign it is there. The stain so intrinsic it doesn't require a mark. The stain that *precedes* disobedience, that *encompasses* disobedience and perplexes all explanation and understanding. It's why all the cleansing is a joke. A barbaric joke at that. The fantasy of purity is appalling. It's insane. What is the quest to purify, if not *more* impurity? All she was saying about the stain was that it's inescapable. That, naturally, would be Faunia's take on it: the inevitably stained creatures that we are. Reconciled to the horrible, elemental imperfection. (HS 242)

Rather than an edenic innocence, in these novels the primordial status of the human being is his fallen condition. In the trilogy, all the protagonists as well as some minor characters have to cope with the “entropy” of our “moral system,” with the truth that “every action produces loss” (IMC 318), that life is not possible if not through guilt, error, and betrayal. Any human structure that tries to give artificial order to such chaos—religion, ideology, and even our goodness—surfaces as a set of delusions that we slowly shed as we come to realize the nature of our existence. Stubbornly we

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<sup>40</sup> The police officer to whom Zuckerman asks this is Officer Michael Balich, the son of Drenka Balich, from *Sabbath's Theater*. This appearance is the most evident example of how Roth aspires to incorporate—subtly, mutedly—*Sabbath's Theater* into the American trilogy universe. While *American Pastoral* does not contain any reference to the previous book, Roth inserts one little topographic detail in *I Married a Communist* that refers to the town where Sabbath lives, Madamaska Falls. As he drives Murray Ringold to Athena, Zuckerman says, “we were silent as we swung along the curves of the mountain road and past Lake *Madamaska* and into Athena” (IMC 313, emphasis added). With this detail, Roth ties together geographically the Mickey Sabbath novel and the American trilogy. These ties are consolidated in *The Human Stain*: not only is Michael Balich the policeman who investigates Coleman's incident, but the common topography is reasserted and strengthened. Now Zuckerman does not live only “about ten miles from a college town called Athena,” as he says to Jerry in *American Pastoral* (63), but also “a few miles up Madamaska Mountain” (43); and when he enters into the café where Faunia's father is eating his breakfast, Zuckerman pretends “to read the *Madamaska Weekly Gazette*” (296). The unification of the two diegetic universes is highly significant: these details invite the Roth reader to consider *Sabbath's Theater* as linked to the American trilogy, a sort of Madamaskian *comédie humaine*. I believe this might be the second result—the first one being the character reorganization of his novels the “Books by Philip Roth” page that first appeared in *The Human Stain*—of Roth's evident meditation upon his career. By interlinking these four novels, Roth seems to foreground the thematic change that starts with *Sabbath's Theater*. Two are the new directions in the 1995 novel. First of all, that is the first novel in which Roth returns to concentrate on America, on American men, on American history, after a decade in which foreign cities—Prague, London, Jerusalem—became predominant settings of his works. This is a pivotal moment in Roth's oeuvre: he himself attributed his 1990s peak to the discovery of “a new subject, that was an old subject, which was this country, that it was brand-new to me, in a strange way, yet I knew all about it, since I've been brought up here” (Brown n.d.). Second, mortality assumes a center role in Roth's work, something that lasts until *Nemesis*, Roth's last book. It is very likely that this concentration is the result of Roth's 1993 breakdown, which seems to have led him close to suicide, a breakdown to which *Sabbath's Theater* seems to be a response, seems to be Roth's affirmation that he was still alive, and alive to write. This new focus and the freedom to work that isolation grated him permitted him to write what are considered, even by Roth himself, his best works. Roth said that it was while he was writing the Mickey Sabbath novel that he has been most happy, because, as he said, “I felt free. I felt like I am *in charge* now” (Remnick “Clear”88). It would not be inappropriate to think that Roth wanted to bundle this late 1990s novel together because he felt he was writing differently, with a new vigor. The desire to differentiate his post-breakdown work from the pre-breakdown work emerges in this interweaving of four novels. It would be fitting to explore more often *Sabbath's Theater* together with the American trilogy, since Roth invites us to do so with these subtle unification of the two diegetic universes.

maintain our quest for a better life, for a life, but “one’s errors always rise to the surface, don’t they?” (IMC 319). The Swede’s, Ira’s, and Coleman’s attempts to live life on their own terms as the responsible, ordinary, and successful father of a bomber, the successful radio actor, the rapacious Jewish professor—the lives of the men they are not—are possible but unyieldingly bound to their past. Never do they manage to unchain themselves from the consequences of their errors, of their betrayals, of life’s uncontrollability. Once they are dead, their persistence in the world is tied to words. The only terms in which their lives can endure after death are the ones of the biographer. In this case, Zuckerman’s.

With *American Pastoral*, Roth returns to Nathan Zuckerman. However, this Zuckerman is not the one a Roth reader met at the end of *The Facts*. As a matter of fact, the early 1990s did not go light on him, too: after a crisis in 1993, a crisis whose account we do not read, Zuckerman withdraws from society, and goes to live alone in the Berkshires, Massachusetts, where is diagnosed prostate cancer, and is left impotent and incontinent by the consequent prostatectomy. When, at his forty-fifth high-school reunion, Zuckerman explains to Jerry Levov the motivations of his reclusive life, Jerry replies:

“Who are you, Socrates? I don’t buy it. Purely a writer. The single-minded writer. Nothing more.”

“Nothing more all along and I could have saved myself a lot of wear and tear. That’s all I’ve had anyway to keep the shit at bay.”

“What’s ‘the shit’?”

“The picture we have of one another. Layers and layers of misunderstanding. The picture we have of *ourselves*. Useless. Presumptuous. Completely cocked-up. Only we go ahead and we *live* by these pictures. ‘That’s what she is, that’s what he is, this is what I am. This is what happened, this is *why* it happened—’ Enough. (AP 64)

The reason why he takes off to the countryside—far from being death threats, as reported in *Exit Ghost*—reflects Roth’s new tragic mood: as a result of his own 1993 crisis, one infers, Zuckerman found himself exhausted by the constant misapprehension of ourselves and of the others, exhausted by the wrongness inherent in all human relationships. As he did with himself at the time, Roth puts his chosen counterauthor in “the place where you are stripped back to the essentials, to which you return—even if it happens not to be where you come from—to decontaminate and absolve yourself of the striving” (IMC 72). Roth scrapes everything off Zuckerman—wife, stepdaughter, unborn child, family, in-laws—but his profession and his imagination. In 1993, Zuckerman recedes from the world, “away from all agitating entanglements, allurements, and expectations,” away from “the

turbulence and intensity” (HS 44-5), and starts leading a life of “abnegation from society, abstention from distraction, a self-imposed separation from every last professional yearning and social delusion and cultural poison and alluring intimacy, a rigorous reclusion such as practiced by religious devouts” (HS 43). If compared to the man in *The Counterlife*, the Zuckerman of the 1990s is a more meditative and aged man, more disengaged with the world and himself, less angry and mischievous, with little of the comedy that dominated in earlier books, but the same ferocious creative power. Alone up on Madamaska Mountain, Zuckerman enters old age, and is, like “the old Chinese man all alone under the mountain, receding from the agitation of the autobiographical. He has entered vigorously into competition with life; now, becalmed, he enters into competition with death, drawn into austerity, the final business” (IMC 72).<sup>41</sup>

However, Zuckerman finds the sparks that make his imagination burn in the anomalies to this seclusion and solitude. In the American trilogy, it is only when he has direct contact with Swede Levov, Ira and Murray Ringold, and Coleman Silk, when he learns their stories and their secrets either from them or from their siblings, that Zuckerman becomes entranced by the mystery of their lives. Whether they reemerge from the author’s past (as in Swede Levov’s and Ira Ringold’s cases)

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<sup>41</sup> <sup>41</sup> As it is obvious to anyone who considers Zuckerman’s trajectory over time, there are huge gaps in coherence when it comes to Zuckerman’s biography. If the material of *The Ghost Writer* and *Zuckerman Unbound* comes up regularly—and with a vengeance in *Exit Ghost*—there are situations where Zuckerman avoids referring to the reality of the previous books. When in *Exit Ghost* Zuckerman provides an account of his last eleven years in the Berkshires, for instance, he fails to mention figures, such as Murray Ringold or Coleman Silk, that had a prominent role in his life as it was told in the American Trilogy. The only figure that broke his solitude in all those years, in *Exit Ghost*’s version, is Larry Hollis, who is completely absent in the American Trilogy. As Shipe says, “*Exit Ghost* does not much provide closure to the series, but instead disturbs and rips open our sense of the series—the novel posing questions that it’s unwilling to answer” (197). A similar—and, in my opinion, more interesting—gap occurs between his situation in *The Facts* and the one in *American Pastoral*. If in *The Facts* Zuckerman is a father-to-be headed for a tranquil family life in Chiswick, London, in *American Pastoral* he is divorced, childless, living alone in the Berkshires, Massachusetts, bearing the side effects of radical prostatectomy. In the whole American Trilogy there is only one possible reference to his relationship with Maria Freshfield Zuckerman. It occurs when Zuckerman meets Jerry Levov at the class reunion. When Jerry asks him how he is, he says, “I read somewhere, on the back of some book, you were living in England with an aristocrat.” He responds by saying, “I live in New England now, without an aristocrat” (AP 63). Having said this, one can only suppose Jerry is referring to Maria, since calling her an aristocrat is far-fetched. Nothing more about Maria or the child she had borne for eight months in 1988 or England—at least directly; yet it is enough to avoid discarding Zuckerman’s reality in *The Counterlife* and *The Facts* as fiction. On the other hand, I believe that in the American Trilogy Zuckerman addresses what happened in those nine years with his reticence to talk about his own story. In an important passage in *I Married a Communist*, he says: “my seclusion is not the story here. It is not a story in any way. I came here because I don’t want a story any longer. I’ve had my story” (MC 71). From these sentences a reader can infer the profound history of pain that led Zuckerman to withdraw to the countryside. The reason why he is living such an austere life is because he does not “want a story any longer” (MC 17): his move is one to protect himself from “the turbulence and the intensity” (HS 45). Those nine years must have been painfully eventful for Zuckerman: a divorce from a woman he cares about, at least in 1988; the death of a child, or his or her abandonment; solitary withdrawal to America and to the country; prostate cancer, and the incontinence and impotence deriving from the prostatectomy. Where is Zuckerman’s inner life of this period? We have nothing about it. Rather, he tells us his motive for his move to the Berkshires in *Exit Ghost*: he was receiving death threats that the FBI took seriously, and, being suggested that he should act with extreme carefulness, he took it a step forward. This story seems to be, if the truth at all, a mere excuse to justify an action which had completely different motives. Although it is comprehensible that Roth wanted a Zuckerman not too much tied to the previous books, that Zuckerman is functional to the diegetic universe that Roth wants him to be in, by using him repeatedly he leads the reader of the Zuckerman books toward a reading of Zuckerman in terms of a coherent narrative, as Pia Masiero demonstrates. Because of this, the gaps becomes relevant to the reader, and to the biography of Zuckerman.

or emerge from his present (in Coleman Silk's case), these figures invite, if not demand, Zuckerman to put his talent to work for them. They ask him to write for them, they ask him to listen to their stories, they ask him to participate in their lives—eventually, they reveal themselves before him. It is only when the Swede and Coleman, Ira and Murray are all dead; it is when he learns about the crucial events that determined their lives and their secrets; it is when he comes in contact with the tragedies of these men brought down to their knees by the intrusion of palpable history in the private chaos that is everybody's life; it is when these men, who resisted his power of interpretation, reveal themselves to be somebody different from the men Zuckerman thought they were; it is when these tragedies are about to slip into oblivion that Zuckerman does respond to his heroes' demand for a book, and sets to unravel their lives on the page, to present their tragedies in the proper way, as a author of fiction should do.

But what is the story to tell? While writing, Ira Ringold's story turns into a reconstruction of memories,<sup>42</sup> whereas Zuckerman is in possession only of fragments of the stories of Seymour "Swede" Levov, and of Coleman Silk. In *American Pastoral* and *The Human Stain*, the mechanisms through which we perceive other people come to be the primary focus. The central question becomes how to concoct a sense-making narrative from specks of actual knowledge, how to overcome the elemental unknowability of the other, how to compensate for our ignorance of the

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<sup>42</sup> In the American Trilogy, *I Married a Communist* presents some thematic concentrations and structural constructions that, to a certain degree, set it apart from *American Pastoral* and *The Human Stain*. The first and third installments of the Trilogy present many analogies that are not shared by the second one. First, Zuckerman is contacted by the Swede and Coleman Silk because they want some sort of writerly service: the Swede asks him to write a biographical sketch about his father, and Coleman asks him to write a book about the Spooks affair. Second, Zuckerman's direct involvement is minimal with the Swede, and greater but limited in time and intimacy with Silk. Third, the sort of creative effort that Zuckerman puts in his attempt to reconstruct his subjects' stories is largely imaginative, and includes, sometimes, even outright invention. Fourth, he produces two long narratives about their lives, which is something quite different from what they asked. Fifth, their deaths occur within the novel, and they are the moments that prompt Zuckerman to write about them. The foundations of *I Married a Communist* are different. First, Murray Ringold does not approach Zuckerman with the request for a book. Zuckerman and his high school teacher meet by chance and spend six evenings together talking about Ira. Murray's implicit request for a book comes when he says, "My last task. To file Ira's story with Nathan Zuckerman." To this Zuckerman replies, "I don't know what I can do with it," and Murray responds by saying, "That's not my responsibility. My responsibility is to tell it to you" (IMC 265). Murray consigns Ira's story because he wants Zuckerman to do something with it, and, since he is a fiction writer, there is little he can do but writing about it, but nothing of this has the explicit character of the Swede's or Coleman's requests. Second, the ties between Zuckerman and Ira are of a different proportion than the ones he has with either the Swede or Coleman Silk. Ira is a father figure in his youth, somebody with whom he establishes an important friendship, a relationship about which Zuckerman bears many memories. He has an involvement with him that cannot be compared to his involvement with the heroes of the other novels of the trilogy. Third, the sort of creative effort that Zuckerman does is different here. Zuckerman provides an account—one carefully crafted so as to present the story properly—of his six evenings with Murray, which becomes a second narrator. The dialogic narrative that composes Ira's story incrementally is a act of remembrance, which is recreated fictionally by Zuckerman (Masiero analyzes in depth the silent manipulation of the six evening by Zuckerman and his persistence throughout the novel in her book, *Philip Roth and the Zuckerman Books: The Making of a Storyworld*). There is not the conscious fictionalization of *American Pastoral* and *The Human Stain*. The story is presented in the wholeness by Murray and Zuckerman, and the problem here is its presentation. Fourth, the narrative that Zuckerman produces consists, by and large, of what Murray had implicitly asked him. Fifth, Ira is long dead by the time Zuckerman meets Murray. These peculiarities leads me to treat, in the context of my work, *I Married a Communist* differently. The focus of this chapter will be, in fact, on the two other novels that constitute the American trilogy.

facts as we make a serious attempt at apprehending these men. Zuckerman's presence within the novel, and his own attempt to make his subjects intelligible by writing about them permit Roth to investigate these issues that have been one of his focal issues ever since the mid 1980s. As Debra Shostak wrote, "with the device of this narrator, Roth is able to raise questions about how to tell a story out of fragments without having to answer them fully" (*Countertexts* 232). Zuckerman's connection to his subjects comes to assume a universal appeal: Roth's counterauthor epitomizes the relationship of every individual with another. Through Zuckerman's imaginative effort to write down the Swede's and Coleman Silk's lives, Roth discloses how understanding others becomes a narrative a priori act. Zuckerman's problem is also our own: our perception of the other shows itself in its oxymoronic nature—intrinsically unattainable, yet necessary.

This apparently irresolvable duality is repeatedly foregrounded. On the one hand, Roth reiterates regularly the idea of our inability to know anything about other people, of our incapacity to resolve the conundrum someone else is, the idea that "our understanding of people must always be at best slightly wrong" (HS 22). The pastiche of multiple selves, masks, impersonations, and identities that is labyrinthine in our own self becomes inextricable in another person. An accurate portrait of another human being becomes inevitably wrong—a chimeric enterprise, a utopia we cannot stop walking toward. On the other hand, the sure failure of this endeavor does not placate our stubborn efforts to make unifying narratives out of the fragmentary. Creating those more or less fictive stories is our primeval instinct whenever we strive to comprehend someone else. Such stories are the foundations of each and every human contact; and, since radical withdrawal from society concerns only hermits, such stories are the foundation of our lives. Coming up with a consistent idea about another person is part of our inborn need to put order to the chaos that would generate if we accept the manifoldness of the other's personality as well as the incompleteness of our perception. We need at least the illusion of order, the illusion of an explanation. One of *American Pastoral* most powerful pages illustrates this debate with energy and clarity, and is worth quoting in full.

You fight your superficiality, your shallowness, so as to try to come at people without unreal expectations, without an overload of bias or hope or arrogance, as untanklike as you can be, sans cannon and machine guns and steel plating half a foot thick; you come at them unmenacingly on your own ten toes instead of tearing up the turf with your caterpillar treads, take them on with an open mind, as equals, man to man, as we used to say, and yet you never fail to get them wrong. You might as well have the *brain* of a tank. You get them wrong before you meet them, while you're anticipating meeting them; you get them wrong while you're with them; and then you go home to tell somebody else about the meeting and you get them all wrong

again. Since the same generally goes for them with you, the whole thing is really a dazzling illusion empty of all perception, an astonishing farce of misperception. And yet what are we to do about this terribly significant business of *other people*, which gets bled of the significance we think it has and takes on instead a significance that is ludicrous, so ill-equipped are we all to envision one another's interior workings and invisible aims? Is everyone to go off and lock the door and sit secluded like the lonely writers do, in a soundproof cell, summoning people out of words and then proposing that these word people are closer to the real thing than the real people that we mangle with our ignorance every day? 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. But if you can do that—well, lucky you. (AP 35)

It is through Roth that I have come to see how unfit we are to relate to the unknown. Without some countervailing force, we would be overwhelmed by “the uncontrollability of real things,” and would easily go insane (OS 69). We need at least the illusion of order, the illusion of an explanation. The unifying narratives through which we cognize the kaleidoscopic reality creates a simulacrum of our knowledge, a simulacrum we exchange for the real. This artificial a posteriori coherence is a human need congenital to our nature. Only then, when the unintelligible turns intelligible, can we forget that such stories are our own deformations of the real thing, and take them to be faithful representations, and base our life on them. Despite their fictive essence, they are our reality, in all its concreteness. All of us, when we are confronted with the insurmountable limits of our comprehension, are like Zuckerman as he tries to understand his subjects: “I can only do what everyone does who thinks they know. I imagine. I am forced to imagine” (HS 213).

This is what Philip Roth has taught me, and led me to meditate upon: the astonishment at our constant imaginative manipulation of the real. This interest grew in me reading upon reading of *American Pastoral* and *The Human Stain*. The imaginative element of Zuckerman's enterprise—a realization that stroke me hard at the time—is important because, far from being a mere metanarrative game, it revels in human matter. The effort is not less normal, less ordinary, less mundane because he tells the fictionally-enhanced stories as a professional writer. I was staggered when I realize that I do the same for my girlfriend, my father, my mother, my brother—so do all of us, for that matter. Reading Philip Roth, I comprehended a little more of how we overcome the limits of our perception. Indeed, the cognition of the real, of other people, of ourselves, is our green light. It eludes us every day, “but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther... And one fine morning——” (Fitzgerald 144). Besides to the past, we are also ceaselessly borne back to the fictionalized narratives of our life.

*Never More Mistaken About Anyone in My Life*

When you died, of course, those wrong  
opinions were all there was left.

— Alice Munro, “Floating Bridge”

Only recently—after almost seven years of reading, rereading, studying, discussing, and revering this novel—did I learn how Roth came to write *American Pastoral*. During the Indignation Day Webcast I was surprised when, in passing, he said that the project began in the 1970s. Indeed, in recent interviews and in criticism to which I got around only in these months, I read that Roth had written a sixty- or seventy-page manuscript about a girl who, as a protest to the Vietnam War, blows up a building in her hometown in 1972. In those years, he couldn’t make it work. “In the beginning, all I saw was the war, that’s why I hit a barrier, and couldn’t go any further” (WOS 92). Until the 1990s, no sooner had he finished a novel, he would return to that manuscript and try to unlock those pages. “[I] would say to myself, ‘There’s something here,’ but I couldn’t for the life of me figure it out” (WOS 90). Until he finished *Sabbath’s Theater*. Then, he saw the family of the girl, and, finally, found the way to tell that story, which was to concentrate on the girl’s father, Seymour “Swede” Levov. The early drafts began not much differently from the finished novel. “I began with two words,” said Roth, “which were ‘Swede Levov,’ the name of this character. And, once I had those two words, I had hundreds of pages to write. Who is he? What is he? What happens to him?”

What is he? Where does he live? Who are the people around him? How is he destroyed?" (WOS 93). Philip Roth unlocked the manuscript by setting out to discover who the father of this violent anti-war activist was, and how his family and his whole life is destroyed by the bomb, as if the Swede were not a character to invent, but a person to get to know. It was here that the problems inherent in knowing others came up with a vengeance.

If I had the chance, I would go to the Library of Congress, in Washington, D.C, in order to see at which stage of the composition of *American Pastoral* Roth decided to bring back his counterauthor par excellence, Nathan Zuckerman, and use his intelligence. This is a central moment in the development of the novel. By having Zuckerman, the novel ceases to be about the Swede and his fall from grace, and turns into Zuckerman's journey of discovery of whom Seymour Levov is, what his tragedy is, what meaning it had, a journey that grows into a fictional expansion—and unification—of bare essentials. While Derek Parker Royal may be excessive and provocative in saying that, "in the case of *American Pastoral*, I would argue that Nathan Zuckerman is the protagonist and not Swede Levov," it is safe to say that this novel as well as the rest of the American trilogy is about Zuckerman as much as it is about its central characters (PRS 7.2, 168).<sup>43</sup> It is through Zuckerman that the manuscript about the girl who blew up the building turns into an investigation on how we make sense of other people's existence.

The girl's father, then, becomes Weequahic High School athletic star and assimilation paragon in the 1940s, and Nathan Zuckerman's childhood hero. They have a brief encounter at Shea Stadium in 1985. Ten years later, Seymour "Swede" Levov contacts Zuckerman because he wants his help for a tribute to his late father, Lou. They have dinner together, without even mentioning the tribute. A few months later, at a high-school reunion, Zuckerman meets Seymour's brother, Jerry, who tells him not only that his brother is dead, but that, back in the Sixties, his brother's daughter blew up her hometown post-office as a protest for the Vietnam war. Only then does Zuckerman begin his book about the Weequahic mythical demigod.

Zuckerman comes to replicate in the diegetic world Roth's own endeavors to understand his character. Roth's counterauthor, in fact, ends up asking himself the same questions Roth asked himself when he recognized that the book had to be about the bomber's father: Who is he? What happens to him? Who are the people around him? How is he destroyed? Roth's project becomes Zuckerman's own within the novel. The first part, "Paradise Remembered," revolves around

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<sup>43</sup> Also other critics foregrounded Zuckerman's prominence in these three novels. For instance, Timothy Parrish wrote that, "to understand *The Human Stain*, then, one must first confront how in the trilogy Roth has made Nathan Zuckerman very much subject to the histories he portrays. Each of the novels employs a kind of Proustian technique whereby Zuckerman's present is absorbed by memories of the past so that his current identity is but a consequence of the events—and other lives—he recalls" (Parrish, "Becoming," 209).



Nathan's approach to the Swede's life story: as a matter of fact, it is structured along the trajectory of Zuckerman's attempts to figure out the Swede's "substratum," his investigation into how life has affected his childhood idol, and his failures in these efforts (AP 20). It is only when the significance of this man's tragedy becomes clear to Zuckerman that he recedes behind the scenes and profoundly immerses himself in the viscera of what he believes to be the most likely development of the Swede's life. However, Zuckerman's narrative, rather than a portrait of the real, cannot but be one of the many possible routes the Swede's life might have taken, as one of the many possible interpretations on the Swede's existence—not his life, but his counterlife. Until the moment when he disappears into his subject, we follow Zuckerman's trajectory of discovery of the Swede, his progressive approximation of a plausible understanding of the man who had monopolized his imagination as a child. In this process, the analogies between writing and living become crystalline, and one can see Zuckerman as an archetype of the man who assimilates the other through stories of his own design.

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When I was studying in London, I attended a creative writing course. During one of the first classes, I was told that every novel or story starts with an inciting incident that breaks a routine. While a little skepticism about these structuralist generalizations persists in me, the inciting incident cannot be clearer in *American Pastoral*. In May 1995, Zuckerman receives a letter from Seymour "Swede" Levov: the Swede asks to have dinner with him because he wants to talk about a tribute to his late father he needs assistance with. Whereas he would have declined this kind of request from anyone else, Zuckerman accepts with little hesitancy. What is the motive that brings Zuckerman out of his safe haven, and leads him to involve himself with a project he would not care less about? First, although sixty-two, Zuckerman is still beguiled by the mythological athlete of Newark's astonishingly energetic first post-war years, the demigod of three sports that enchanted the Weequahic section, and led the Jewish neighborhood into America. Still so captivated is Zuckerman that he cannot relinquish the childish desire to meet the idol that had caught his imagination during the grade-school years as well as ours in the fifteen-odd pages that precede the letter. Yet, to Zuckerman—and to us, too—such perfection becomes a puzzle. Looking back on the 1940s, Zuckerman cannot help but wonder about the man behind that sparking appearance, about the stains

in that spotless facade: “Where was the Jew in him? You couldn’t find it and yet you knew it was there. Where was the irrationality in him? Where was the crybaby in him? Where were the wayward temptations? No guile. No artifice. No mischief” (AP 20). This is the other reason at the heart of his acceptance of such offer: the curiosity to learn something about how life has affected that man whose stellar existence seemed incorruptible, at least in the 1940s.

What sort of mental existence had been his? What, if anything, had ever threatened to destabilize the Swede’s trajectory? No one gets through unmarked by brooding, grief, confusion, and loss. Even those who had it all as kids sooner or later get the average share of misery, if not sometimes more. There had to have been consciousness and there had to have been blight. Yet I could not picture the form taken by either, could not desimplify him even now: in the residuum of adolescent imagination I was still convinced that for the Swede it had to have been pain-free all the way. (AP 20).

Zuckerman’s desire to meet Seymour Levov, therefore, is born out of the simultaneous unresolved presence of two opposite versions of the Swede, two contrastive pictures of him: the continuation of the Swede’s existence in the mythical perfection is juxtaposed to the the Swede who, like most of us, marked by the human stain, has suffered his own dose of pain, a dose that does not seem to show, though. Zuckerman cannot fathom which picture is the right one. Because of the Swede’s magnetism that still captures the author, because of the virginal immaculacy of the surface, the high-school hero resists Nathan’s interpretation, the man remains an enigma: “there had to be a substratum, but its composition was unimaginable” (AP 20). Since the coexistence of these two antithetical pictures would make the Swede unintelligible, Zuckerman needs to find an acceptable narrative framework that could explain the man he is about to meet. What drives Zuckerman to New York is precisely his professional desire to comprehend what sort of life the Swede went through. As he tries to fathom what is beyond the justification of the tribute to his father, the author comes to believe that Seymour’s aim for the dinner is the revelation of his own experience in life’s chaos. How can Zuckerman—a man who says of myself, “I’ve had my story” (IMC 71)—interpret the sentence, “not everyone knew how much he suffered because of the shocks that befell his loved ones,” if not as a veiled confession of a perturbed life (AP 17-18)? Zuckerman is sure: the Swede wants to tell his own story, not his father’s. At the dinner, the author is convinced that he would be given the key to interpret the man correctly.

Needless to say, whatever picture Zuckerman may hold of the Swede at this point is pure conjecture. Since the beginning, the author is trapped in the game of speculation that is the attempt of comprehending someone, a game that will continue throughout the dinner with the Swede.

Zuckerman cannot restrain himself from imagining, from asking himself, What does this other person's life consist of?

The dinner at Vincent's—a twenty-page-long scene—is bookended by the same sentence: "I was wrong" (AP 21, 39). The first "I was wrong" anticipates Zuckerman's apparently unsuccessful quest for his companion's substratum. The Swede's inner existence is nowhere to be seen in the Italian restaurant on West 49th Street, where he had been a regular for decades. During the meal they talk about the Swede's kids, and how he moved his glove factory out of Newark after the 1968 riots. Zuckerman's game of interpretation, his desire to get to the man behind the impeccable surface is thwarted, and, since he cannot go in depth, he comes to the conclusion that there is no depth at all. "What he has instead of a being," thinks Zuckerman, "is blandness—the guy's radiant with it. He has devised for himself an incognito, and the incognito has become him" (AP 23). What peers through the mask of the Swede's pain-free American life—a gorgeous man, the owner of a successful company, with three exemplary kids, married to his second wife—seems to confirm that, contrary to what Zuckerman believed, the tragedy that befell Lou Levov was not his older son's. "*Swede Levov's life, for all I knew,*" says Zuckerman, "*had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore just great, right in the American grain*" (AP 31). The man beyond the appearance, beyond the unspeckled surface, his virginity eludes Zuckerman. According to the author, Seymour Levov's inner existence seems to be no existence at all.

The man within the man was scarcely perceptible to me. I could not make sense of him. I couldn't imagine him at all, having come down with my own strain of the Swede's disorder: the inability to draw conclusions about anything but exteriors. Rooting around trying to figure this guy out is ridiculous, I told myself. This is the jar you cannot open. This guy cannot be cracked by thinking. That's the mystery of his mystery. It's like trying to get something out of Michelangelo's David. (30)

Zuckerman, however, is insatiable. No sooner does he seem to settle on apprehending the Swede as an empty man than he begins casting doubts on this interpretation, than he starts "trying to imbue Swede Levov with something like the tendentious meaning Tolstoy assigned to Ivan Ilych" (AP 31). Sitting opposite his childhood hero, Zuckerman goes on seeking the man who could not have lived more than sixty years without tasting life's bitterness, the man overtaken by the shocks that hurt his father. Out of exhaustion, Zuckerman even supposes and asks if the shock had been Jerry's homosexuality. The Swede confirms that Jerry was not the source of Lou Levov's chagrin; he adds that Jerry could not have made his father prouder. At Vincent's, Zuckerman feels unable to resolve the enigma that is sitting across the table.

Perversely, my attempts to come up with the missing piece that would make the Swede whole and coherent kept identifying him with disorders of which there was no trace on his beautifully aging paragon's face. I could not decide if that blankness of his was like snow covering something or snow covering nothing" (AP 37)

The dinner becomes the showcase for the modes in which we experience others, an occasion to meditate on what occurs when we set out to comprehend someone else. Zuckerman's attempt to find a convergence between his own conjectures about the Swede and the man he talks with displays itself as a customary behavior: the strife among the many possible interpretation of an individual—all based on the myriad misconceptions with which one faces another—concludes when one settles on the one narrative he takes as the most plausible, the one that permits identification and explanation, the one that conveys a unity that makes such individual identifiable. But that is all one's fabrications about the other. We never get him right; but, "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" (AP 35).

As the dinner comes to an end without any mention of the tribute to Lou Levov, Zuckerman becomes weary of impregnating the Swede with an interiority, an intellectual complexity, a self-awareness, and self-control of which no external proof can be found. Eventually, he settles on a conclusion. "There's nothing here but what you're looking at," Zuckerman says to himself. "He's all about being looked at. He always was. He is not faking all this virginity. You're craving depths that don't exist. This guy is the embodiment of nothing" (AP 39).

The dinner scene concludes with this line: "I was wrong. Never more mistaken in my entire life" (AP 39). A couple of months later, in fact, the portrait Zuckerman has created about the Swede—a narrative of a perfect, ordinary, unanalyzed, superficial existence—is turned inside out, disclosed in all its fictionality and foundational wrongness, when Zuckerman, at his forty-fifth high-school reunion, meets Jerry Levov, the Swede's brother. On that occasion, Jerry turns into a shrine of information about who the Swede was, information that undermines everything Zuckerman thought of the Swede after the dinner. After an interesting exchange about the "past undetonated" of

the reunion and how Zuckerman's life is at that moment (AP 61),<sup>44</sup> Zuckerman mentions that he saw the Swede only a few months earlier. At that point, Jerry's revelations begin to unfold. First and foremost, "the indestructible hero of the wartime Weequahic section, our neighborhood talisman, the legendary Swede" was dead (AP 65): the prostate cancer that he claimed that had been removed, the cancer he purposefully hid, was in fact metastasized, and it killed him only a few days before the reunion. Under the impulse created by the trauma, under the drive and the distortion of the "mourner's rethinking" (AP 66), Jerry Levov launches into an exposé of his candid, inevitably personal, artificial version of his brother's existence. This passage in the novel—one of those that I reread most often, one of those that my professor pointed out to me when she opened up *American Pastoral* to me after my first reading—is of paramount importance since the basic, verifiable facts that come to light as well as insights on the Swede and the members of his family are the foundation of Zuckerman's full-fledged inquisition of his subject's existence. After a brief introduction to Jerry's Lou Levov—not Seymour's dignified father who was "his feisty, combative self right down to the end" (AP 17), but "one impossible bastard. Overbearing. Omnipresent" (AP 66)—Jerry begins talking about a Swede that, besides being deformed by Jerry's inevitable reconsideration after his burial, has little to do with the man Zuckerman believes he was.

No reason for him to know anything about anything except gloves. Instead he is plagued with shame and uncertainty and pain for the rest of his life. The incessant questioning of a conscious adulthood was never something that obstructed my brother. He got the meaning of life some other way. I don't mean he was simple. Some people thought he was simple because all his life he was so kind. But Seymour was never that simple. Simple is *never* that simple. Still, the self-questioning did take some time to reach him. And if there's anything worse than self-questioning coming too early in life, it's self-questioning coming too late. His life was blown up by that bomb. The real victim of that bombing was him. (AP 68)

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<sup>44</sup> The initial conversation between Zuckerman and Jerry Levov is very telling, and it addresses some central issues. First, it is immensely revealing of Jerry's character. When Jerry tells Zuckerman that he did not expect him to be there, he provides him with a picture of who he is: "You're somebody who has banished all superfluous sentiments from his life. No asinine longings to be home again. No patience for the nonessential. Only time for what's indispensable" (AP 61). These four sentences are indeed enough to make a first idea of him, and share Zuckerman's view that "he had the character of one big unified thing, coldly accustomed to being listened to" (AP 61). This outpouring of self-confidence is repeated a little later when he describes Nathan at a young age ("You were more theoretical than the rest of us. [...] You kept a sharp watch over yourself. All the crazy stuff contained inside" (AP 62)) as well as when he says that writing makes you into somebody who is never wrong. Second, Jerry, wondering why Zuckerman is there, addresses the concept of high-school reunion, dismantling the structured evocation of an idyllic past that is a reunion: "After all, what they around calling the 'past' at these things isn't a fragment of a fragment of the past. It's the past undetonated—nothing is really brought back, nothing. It's nostalgia. It's bullshit" (AP 61). This offers a negative counterweight to the reunion as a successful confrontation with mortality, which is what Zuckerman sees in relating with his old schoolmates. Third, this exchange is the stage for the presentation of Zuckerman's life at the moment. For the first time after *The Facts*, we get to know a Zuckerman who is living an austere life in the Berkshires, like E. I. Lonoff in *The Ghost Writer*. When he met his literary mentor, Zuckerman says, such austerity looked excessively, but now he sees it differently: "He maintained it solved his problems. Now it solves mine" (AP 63). Furthermore, as I have said earlier in the chapter, it anticipates the thematic thread that runs through the whole trilogy, that is, the problem of understanding others: this is after all the "shit" that Zuckerman escapes with his solitude (AP 64).

Only here, sixty-odd pages after the first word, does the reader find the basic idea that, in 1972, led Roth to work on the the *Ur-American Pastoral*. Only here does Zuckerman learn about the big secret, the explosive intrusion of history that broke the Swede's family and life apart: the bomb that his daughter, Merry, set off in their hometown's post-office as a protest against the Vietnam war, the bomb that killed a man and forced Merry to go underground. That unmatched glorified perfection that is Swede Levov's life receives a blow from which one cannot recover. Piece by piece, his life is torn apart, as Jerry tells Zuckerman, and so is his marriage to Dawn Dwyer, Miss New Jersey 1949, a woman for whom Jerry has little sympathy. Despite the Swede's seemingly successful efforts at a second family—that second family whose magnificence he flaunted during his dinner with Zuckerman—never is Seymour Levov able to get back on his feet, to recover from it and let it go. “One day life started laughing at him,” Jerry says, “and it never let up” (AP 74).

At this point, Joy Helpern, Zuckerman's high-school sweetheart, comes up to the author and introduces herself. Jerry leaves their company, and soon afterwards also the reunion, and the book. Never does Zuckerman meet Jerry in the flesh again. Zuckerman would have liked to know more, but now he no longer can. However, he does not need to learn more so as to be completely mesmerized by his childhood idol's tragedy. The knowledge of Merry's bomb causes an interpretative trauma within Zuckerman: the Swede can no longer be “the embodiment of nothing” (AP 39). Indeed, the snow covered something—something big, something unsettling and tragic, something that Zuckerman was not able to see at Vincent's. His portrait of the Swede has to be redrawn from scratch. The Weequahic post-war hero manifests himself as the antithesis of the man who is all surface. His life—anything but ordinary—turns out to be fictionally *interesting*, to be the same stuff great tragedies are made of. Who is the Swede, then? Zuckerman is spellbound. From the moment Jerry leaves, he cannot relent his concentration on the course of the Swede's existence. While Joy Helpern tells Nathan what she could not tell him fifty years earlier, the author's mind drifts to the Swede Levov, in search of the meaning of such existence. Questions pile up, without answers. Nathan starts pondering about the motive that brought the Swede to contact him, and the motive that the Swede did not say a word about it during their dinner; about the masks the Swede learned to wear in front of others, the masks that hid the horror; about how the perfect realization of the dream of the third-generation, post-ethnic immigrant—the archetypal American Dream—is annihilated by the hand of the quintessential force of down-to-earth history that is violence; about “the brutality of the destruction of the indestructible man” (AP 83); about how the Swede “had learned the worst lesson that life can teach—that it makes no sense” (AP 81); about the

Swede, “our Kennedy” (AP 83), and “the daughter who transports him out of the longed-for American pastoral and into everything that is its antithesis and its enemy, into the fury, the violence, and the desperation of the counterpastoral—into the indigenous American berserk” (AP 86).

The Swede’s submersion in the destructive forces of one’s country life as well as one’s individual life, his unexpected descent into life’s senselessness comes to possess Zuckerman. For twelve pages, he increasingly yields to the magnetism of the Swede’s tragedy as he increasingly disassociates himself from the present, where he is talking and dancing with Joy Helpern to the slow rhythm of Johnny Mercer’s “Dream.” At this point, however, Jerry’s take of the facts no longer satisfies Zuckerman’s professional instincts for inquiry, and the writer begins to wonder beyond the limits of his knowledge. The dinner at Vincent’s and the conversation with Jerry remain the only sources of information about the Swede’s private life, and, as Zuckerman says, “anything more I wanted to know, I’d have to make up” (AP 74). It is in this moment that Zuckerman—who knows only scraps of information about the Swede’s life, only some crucial points, only some minimal features of the people around him—begins to fill the gaps. The portrait begins anew, in the light of the new information. At the reunion, Zuckerman begins composing a new narrative that may explain the great man’s fall from the American pastoral. As he sways on the dance-floor with the oldish woman that once was his high-school sweetheart, “I began,” says Zuckerman, “to work out *for myself* what exactly had shaped a destiny unlike any imagined for the famous Weequahic three-letterman” (AP 87, emphasis added). Zuckerman himself takes the responsibility of making sense, of reconstructing and re-imagining what happened to his neighborhood hero. The author begins to consider the Swede as a character in a book, a character he has to understand, a character he needs to write about. The Swede becomes the subject, and Zuckerman plunges into him.

To wish oneself into another’s glory, as boy or as man, is an impossibility, untenable on psychological grounds if you are not a writer, and on aesthetic grounds if you are. To embrace your hero in his destruction, however—to let your hero’s life occur within you when everything is trying to diminish him, to imagine yourself into his bad luck, to implicate yourself not in his mindless ascendancy, when he is the fixed point of your adulation, but in the bewilderment of his tragic fall—well, that’s worth thinking about. (AP 88).

Zuckerman surrenders to his consuming desire to comprehend this man’s substratum. Now that Swede Levov is dead, he feels it is up to him to find—and create, if not found—the causality that underlies an existence destroyed by unintelligible forces. Under the musical encouragement of “Dream,” he starts to imaginatively strive for wholeness with professional intensity. Not yet at his desk, not yet separated from Joy Helpern’s embrace, Zuckerman tries to figure out not so much the

real cause of the Swede's disaster, but rather the explanation that the Swede must have used to justify to himself his disaster; he imagines that single transgression the Swede must have used to blame himself for his disaster, that transgression to which he assigned the responsibility of his fall. And so it begins...

To the honeysweet strains of "Dream," I pulled away from myself, pulled away from the reunion, and I dreamed... I dreamed a realistic chronicle. I began gazing into his life—not his life as a god or a demigod in whose triumphs one could exult as a boy but his life as another assailable man—and, inexplicably, which is to say lo and behold, I found him in Deal, New Jersey. (AP 89)

Zuckerman vanishes into his subject, and begins telling us about the time when, after a day on the beach, the Swede kissed the mouth of his eleven-year-old daughter. From there on, for three hundred and thirty pages, until the conclusive question, Zuckerman—hidden within his character, not to be mentioned again for the rest of the novel, but consistently present<sup>45</sup>—continues his "realistic chronicle" about Seymour Levov's descent into the "American berserk" (AP 89, 86). In my first reading, my mistake was to take Zuckerman's story at face value, to consider it truthful; but Zuckerman's work is realistic but not real, plausible but not factual. What follows is a fiction that springs from facts: not at all the Swede's true story, but Zuckerman's thorough imaginative inquisition on one of the possible alternative interpretations to the Swede's existence in those tormented years in which the realized dream dissolves into chaos.

It is a common experience among readers to take the rest of the novel as the real story. I expected to be told more about the sources later—as it happens in *The Human Stain*, to some extent—but, absorbed by the story, I forgot about it. I was relieved, however, when I was told that more than one reviewer also stumbled into the trap.<sup>46</sup> Detecting this shift is indeed thorny: although "the shift in focalization—adumbrated in Zuckerman's using two highly significant verbs (inhabiting and disappearing)—is carefully prepared and explained" (Masiero "Nothing," 181), Roth traces the

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<sup>45</sup> In her article "'Nothing is Impersonally Perceived': Dreams, Realistic Chronicles and Perspectival Effects in *American Pastoral*," Pia Masiero demonstrates how—although immersed in his character, hidden in the Swede's perspective—Zuckerman's presence is constant even after this transition and singles out "moments in which Zuckerman's voice is very clearly audible" (187). "The most glaring case," she writes, "concerns the (implicit) reference to the book being written," which I talk about in note 48 of this chapter; "other cases easy to settle concern what Zuckerman literally supplements, namely, what *does not* occur to the Swede, what he does imagine" (188), but she also goes into less obvious but more important perspectival effects that confirm that Zuckerman never disappears from the narrative.

<sup>46</sup> In *Salon.com*, the National Critic Circle Award winner Albert Mobilio, in his ungenerous review of *American Pastoral*, fails to mention that the Swede we read about is Zuckerman's fabrication. He laments also that "Roth doesn't circle back to the 90-page preamble featuring Zuckerman, the ending feels arbitrary and the gratifying if bracing payoff that *American Pastoral* vigorously promises throughout is denied" (Mobilio nd). Faced with this sort of reflection, I cannot help thinking that the transition and crucial passages of the book were missed in his reading. Also *Library Journal* does not mention the fictional nature of Zuckerman's narrative about the Swede as well as *Publishers Weekly*.



passage from the diegetically real world to the diegetically invented world—from Zuckerman’s own story about his discovery of the Swede to his novel about him—so subtly, so seamlessly that he facilitates our misreading. He wants us to take that invention as true. Roth wants to confuse us, to take as real what is fictional. As the author said in an interview in the 1980s, “I *want* belief, and I work to try to get it” (Hamilton 193). In this way Philip Roth wants the reader to replicate his experience in believing the imaginary, he needs the reader to forget that the characters are not real people. “The idea,” Roth said about composing fiction, “is to perceive your invention as a reality that can be understood as a dream. The idea is to turn flesh and blood into literary characters and literary characters into flesh and blood” (Lee 208). Roth wants us to take the Swede as flesh and blood in a way analogous to how we take our fictions about others as the real thing everyday. His illusion of the real is grafted onto our mundane illusions of the real.

After I was told what was happening on page 89, my instinct was to separate the real from the invented. If I should trace this to my fascination with the writerly craftsmanship or to the normal hierarchy that values the first over the latter, I do not know. For whatever reason, no sooner had I got home than I played the game of the sources. On the one hand, the reader knows well what Zuckerman knows. Up to the transition, “Paradise Remembered” draws a map of Zuckerman’s knowledge of the Swede, identifying the fragments of information that become the kernel of his further work. First, we have Nathan’s childhood recollections about the athletic hero of Weequahic; second, the persistence of Zuckerman’s adulation in 1985; third, the failed apprehension of the Swede during the dinner in New York; fourth, the conversation with Jerry at the high-school reunion. It is interesting to see how Zuckerman uses his sources. The perfect example is how the author amplifies each innocuous detail of what Jerry says about his brother into his fiction: Jerry’s suspicion that his brother had “been going to see [Merry] in hiding for years,” is turned into a crucial scene between chapter five and six. Of Dawn, among other things, Jerry says that, first, “no house they lived in was right;” second, that the Swede “set her up in the cattle business. That didn’t work out;” third, “he took her to Switzerland for the world’s best face-lift” (AP 73). Each of this pieces of information is transformed in major scenes later in the novel. On the other hand, Zuckerman is not only inflating what he knows. One can see how certain features of the characters, events, details, and even brand-new figures are born outright out of Zuckerman’s imagination. Merry’s infatuation with Catholicism, the scene of the kiss at Deal, NJ, and the final fork-stabbing of Lou Levov are all fine examples, but the best one is, without any doubt, Rita Cohen: a classic

mischief-maker in Roth's tradition,<sup>47</sup> she is a catalyzer of the book's drama, a character that has not root whatsoever in the factual knowledge of the Swede, and a character that still baffles me in her lunacy, her irreverence, her unintelligibility. This distinction of the real from the invented, however, has little significance, if not in illuminating Roth's art of fiction. The desire to steep oneself in the safe ground of the real is delusional. Although it is difficult to us to grasp the imaginative in its tangible reality, Zuckerman's "fictional amplification" of Seymour Levov has to be taken as concretely as the original Seymour Levov: to Zuckerman and its reader, in the end, that imaginative Swede is truer than the one the author met at Vincent's.

Let's retrace our steps. Between Jerry's departure from Zuckerman and the first exchange with Joy Helpern, Zuckerman inserts a metanarrative aside of paramount importance, a parenthesis that turns out to be a well-anticipated and unexpected closing of the framing structure of the novel. This passage illustrates how, after the reunion, in his solitary cabin in the Berkshires, Zuckerman began working on the Swede as a professional fiction writer. He also describes here his field trips to the locations of Seymour Levov's life, his research of the Swede's results in the sports pages of the 1940s, his hunt for Dawn Dwyer's photographs, and his rereading of John R. Tunis's baseball books, those that the Swede had in his bedroom as a boy. Here is the only occasion—except minor but significant references within the narrative<sup>48</sup>—in which we read that Zuckerman writes a book about Seymour Levov. It is a crucial passage in *American Pastoral* that winds up easily forgotten. As Masiero says, "no wonder that buried as it is in the middle of a very emotional intense scene, the closing frame ends up forgotten exactly like the spelling out of the sources of the Swede's presentation" ("Nothing," 181). We are sent to the concluding moment of the fabula, when Zuckerman finishes writing his book about the Swede.

Besides clarifying the fictional quality of much of the novel, this passage is one of the crucial moments in which Roth tackles the unattainable authenticity of the pictures we fabricate about other people. Taking about his book—a book the first-time reader has yet to begin—Zuckerman is the first to admit that his Swede is far from the real one.

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<sup>47</sup> Throughout Roth's career there is a series of minor characters whose role in the novels is to create darkly comic situations for the protagonist. Among them, Alvin Pepler in *Zuckerman Unbound*, Jimmy Ben-Joseph in *The Counterlife*, Moishe Pipik in *Operation Shylock*, Richard Kliman in *Exit Ghost*. Rita Cohen follows clearly this tradition, which I see as a residue of the Portnoy phase of the last sixties and early seventies.

<sup>48</sup> There is a minor reference to the book being written within the narrative, which is also a clear example of how Zuckerman's voice is hidden but persistently present after the perspective shift on page 89. Zuckerman is describing the aftermath of Merry's bombing, and how the Swede went to visit the victim's widow without Dawn, who had broken down. At that point he says, "How he managed to get that woman's house for tea is another story—another *book*—but he did it, and heroically she served him tea" (215). Needless to say, the reference is implicit, minimal, almost hidden, certainly forgettable, but it is one of those crucial moments in which Zuckerman tells us about the book he is writing.

I would have been willing to admit that my Swede was not the primary Swede. Of course I was working with traces; of course essentials of what he was to Jerry were gone, expunged from my portrait, things I was ignorant of or I didn't want; of course the Swede was concentrated differently in my pages from how he'd been concentrated in the flesh. (AP 76)

After all, one could argue, Zuckerman worked on the Swede from the premise that he is a fiction writer. Imagining raw real-life material into a new altered form is his job. Yet it is here that Zuckerman illuminates the analogy between what he has done with the Swede and our daily exercise in understanding others. If not for the writer's professionalism, the physicality of his creation, and his open license for unabridged invention, fiction writing and comprehending the other consist, by and large, of the same process. This leads to the conclusion that there are as many narratives about an individual as are the people who try to arrive at a comprehension of his identity. Thus, one man is a plurality of people, and comes to encompass a significant number of imaginative variations of himself. In "Paradise Remembered," we have a clear example. The variations on Seymour Levov are at least seven: first, the primary self, the Swede, if there is one; second, Zuckerman's legend about the Weequahic high school hero of the 1940s; third, the Swede's own abridged narrative about his story; fourth, Zuckerman's misinterpretation of him at the New York restaurant; fifth, Jerry's narrative about his brother and the people around him, when, at the reunion, he is affected by a mourner's reconsideration; sixth, the Swede we read about in Zuckerman's book; finally, the Swede's version Zuckerman imagines Jerry has when he reads Zuckerman's manuscript, the objectivized version of Jerry's first version of his brother—all of which are in some way falsified, but also real enough to the person who believes in it. These variations picture the Swede set in different contexts. He encompasses all these different men.

The latter is at the center of this brief but important digression. Once, several months after the reunion, Zuckerman has finished writing the book, he suppresses the amateurish desire to send his manuscript to Jerry to ask what he thinks about it. The author cannot avoid imagining Jerry's comments about his attempt at understanding his brother's existence. What Zuckerman supposes Jerry might say—all highly plausible and in tune with the Jerry we met at the reunion on the previous page—casts doubt on Zuckerman's interpretation of Seymour: " 'That's not my brother,' he'd tell me, 'not in any way. You've misrepresented him. My brother couldn't think like that, didn't talk like that,' etc" (AP 74). Through the comparison between Zuckerman's Swede and this new supposed version of Jerry's Swede—none of which is the real thing—the author foregrounds the primordial opaqueness of otherness, and makes us see that his version is just as fictional as

anyone else's. While Zuckerman imagines Jerry dismantling his Swede and discard him as an interpretative error, he cannot help wondering, whether Jerry's own unwritten narrative about his brother is more accurate than the one he wrote. Needless to say, it is not. Zuckerman makes the reader see how comprehending others is but an imaginative play on the information we have, a play that leads to an inevitable failure. The "business of other people" is rotten at its foundation (AP 35). This is how Zuckerman concludes this parenthetical scene: with an assertion of the human unknowability of the other.

Yet despite these efforts and more to uncover what I could about the Swede and his world, I would have been willing to admit that my Swede was not the primary Swede. [...] But whether that meant I'd imagined an outright fantastical creature, lacking entirely the unique substantiality of the real thing; whether that meant my conception of the Swede was any more fallacious than the conception held by Jerry (which he wasn't likely to see in any way fallacious); whether the Swede and his family came to life in me any less truthfully than in his brother—well, who knows? Who *can* know? When it comes to illuminating someone with the Swede's opacity, to understanding those regular guys everybody likes and who go about more or less incognito, it's up for grabs, it seems to me, as to whose guess is more rigorous than whose. (AP 76-77)

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Let me praise *American Pastoral*. Without any shadow of a doubt, it stands as one of Roth's most accomplished novels, and it is also his own personal favorite with *Sabbath's Theater*.<sup>49</sup> During the composition of the previous pages, the desire to divert the attention to a myriad different things, the countless gems within its four hundred-odd pages was tangible. I wanted to say more about the looming omnipresence of mortality, about the microcosmic lenses Roth uses to look at history, about Roth's piercing grasp of the American character, about the muted ties with Tolstoy and Proust, about the narrative strategies in the rest of the book, and, most importantly, about those sentences that, in a few words, tell us what being human means. However, the focus of my work requires the containment of these impulses. The beauty of this novel endures time, and it can only bloom, for the umpteenth time, at every re-reading.

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<sup>49</sup> In January 2013, a couple of months after the retirement, *The Guardian* reported that, during a video-appearance in Pasadena, CA, Roth said that his own favorites were *Sabbath's Theater* and *American Pastoral*. About the latter he said that, He said that, after *Sabbath's Theater*, he "wanted to write about a conventionally virtuous man. I was sick of Mickey Sabbath and I wanted to go to the other end of the spectrum. I think the book worked, enabled me to write about the most powerful decade of my life, the 60s, and the domestic turbulence of the 60s, and I think I got a lot of that into the book" (Flood).

*American Pastoral* is a wonderful novel even when one takes Zuckerman's book to be the Swede's real story. However, doing so one would miss an important aspect of the reality that Roth conveys into his work. Far from being a meaningless metanarrative game, the double layer of fictionality opens in front of our eyes a defining aspect of our identity. As we follow Zuckerman's journey of discovery—how he got to be interested, to misinterpret, to consider, and, upon consideration, to misinterpret more plausibly Swede Levov—Roth guides us into the viscera of the one of the most basic human behaviors in society.

The focus on other people might seem new for Roth, but this is a false impression. With this first installment of the American Trilogy, Philip Roth continues his inquiry into the persistence of the artificial recomposition and narrative unification of the real that he had already begun since *The Counterlife* and deepened with *Operation Shylock*, but in the mid 1990s the focus shifts from Zuckerman or "Roth" to the tragedies of three ordinarily astonishing men. In the summer of 1998, Zuckerman meets another man who would resist his interpretation, whose story would make him sleepless again, whom Zuckerman would need to write about, to compose anew. He is Coleman Silk.

Nobody *knows*, *Professor Roux*

Man made the truths himself and each truth was  
a composite of a great many vague thoughts. All  
about in the world were the truths and they were  
all beautiful.

— Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*

It was at the beginning of my latest rereading of *The Human Stain* that I stumbled across “Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered”—one of those death-evading Rodgers and Hart standards—among my records. Not Sinatra, but Brad Mehldau. So, the night I began to reread the novel once again—after the first sitting, after the first thirty-odd pages, after the dance between Coleman Silk and Nathan Zuckerman—I put on *The Art of the Trio Vol. 3*, and listened, with my eyes closed, to the gentle melody of that 1940s love song, and, inexplicably, which is to say lo and behold, I found myself on Coleman’s backyard, watching Zuckerman and his neighbor—not at all in the image of Anthony Hopkins and Gary Sinise<sup>50</sup>—dancing the fox trot together. On the screened-in side porch, they swayed slowly, almost romantically, to the slow tempo. In them, the pathos of the youthful pleasure of vitality in the face of impending death. In them, the music and the wish it creates, the “wish not to die, never to die,” a wish “almost too great to bear” (HS 14).

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<sup>50</sup> These were the actors (mis)casted to interpret Coleman Silk and Nathan Zuckerman in the 2003 movie adaptation of the novel by Robert Benton.

On we danced. There was nothing overtly carnal in it, but because Coleman was wearing only his denim shorts and my hand rested easily on his warm back as if it were the back of a dog or a horse, it wasn't entirely a mocking act. There was a semi-serious sincerity in his guiding me about on the stone floor, not to mention a thoughtless delight in just being alive, accidentally and clownishly and for no reason alive—the kind of delight you take as a child when you first learn to play a tune with a comb and toilet paper. (HS 26)

The dance is so filled with raw, unmeditated life that it brings Zuckerman, the author in solitary confinement, out of his seclusion, and—momentarily, it seems—“back into life. [...] That was how,” Zuckerman says, “I ceased being able to live apart from the turbulence and intensity that I had fled. I did no more than find a friend, and all the world's malice came rushing in” (HS 45). That dance breaches Zuckerman's monkish existence and allows reality to flow in unreservedly. Brought out of the safe haven, again Zuckerman is faced with “the shit”—that is, “the picture we have of one another. Layers and layers of misunderstanding. The picture we have of *ourselves*. Useless. Presumptuous. Completely cocked-up” (AP 64). Only the shit is Coleman's, is Faunia's, is Les's, is Delphine Roux's. Through that innocent defiance of death the friendship between the author and his neighbor is immortalized. In that dance, Zuckerman says, resides the genesis of his transmutation of his friend into text, into narrative, into a properly presented puzzle. “Indeed, the dance that sealed our friendship,” Zuckerman says, “was also what made his disaster my subject. And made his disguise my subject. And made the proper presentation of his secret my problem to solve” (HS 45). It is those few steps on the porch that launches Zuckerman into the unraveling of Coleman's “disaster,” his “disguise,” his “secret,” into a new literary project, into the narrative of Coleman's lives and counterlives.

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It is a truth universally acknowledged that the reputation of a difficult book puts the reader off. To my knowledge, *The Human Stain* does not come with such reputation, and yet I would not be surprised if it did. The concluding installment of the American trilogy is a challenging read. A suggestion of extra caution can go a long way—at least, it would have helped me on my first time around. Philip Roth demands his reader to engage actively to grasp the multi-layered reality of the novel; as Posnock wrote, *The Human Stain* “asks the readers to be game, invites them to tap their

own capacity for interpretative play. Roth in effect encourages this by foregrounding the power of language in a number of scenes that dramatize intense acts of reading, as if to inspire our own” (195). Indeed, the novel makes its demands to the reader. The reader can respond as well as not, and enjoy the book all the same, and this is probably why the reputation of being difficult does not stick to *The Human Stain*. Yet it is only in the complex reading experience that the sublime can be brought to the open.

In the American trilogy, *The Human Stain* stands as the most ambitious and the most convoluted novel. Here Roth reprises the narratological and thematic project of *American Pastoral* only to renovate and complicate it: this time not only is Zuckerman telling stories about the protagonists (more than one in this case) and getting them wrong, but so is everybody else. It is through this ubiquitous storytelling that Roth goes on problematizing the narrative tactics at the base of our comprehension of the other, pursuing thus the thematic trajectory he has been carrying on since *The Counterlife*. *The Human Stain* arises as a masterpiece of our unending misinterpretations of other people.

In this novel, Nathan Zuckerman is brought “back into life” (HS 45) by Coleman Silk, his neighbor and a former professor at Athena College who has been forced to early retirement because of absurd accusations of racism. In 1996, when his wife dies around the time of the scandal, an enraged Silk intrudes into Zuckerman’s house and life with a demand of an account of the injustice of which he was victim. Zuckerman refuses the offer, but they become friends. But in the summer of 1998, Nathan becomes the spectator of Coleman’s rejuvenation in a love affair with an illiterate cleaning lady in her thirties, Faunia Farley, an affair that sends Coleman’s rampant rage at his own farcical fall into oblivion. Coleman’s involvement with Faunia, however, elicits the threats of her ex-husband, Les Farley, and the sanctimonious reaction of his former academic prosecutor, Delphine Roux. When the couple dies in a car accident caused by Les Farley, a mayhem of gossip and falseness ensues. The banality of those uncontrollable insinuations, the wrongness of those innumerable misapprehensions disgusts Zuckerman. When he learns his friend’s long-kept secret at his funeral, the author—similarly to what he did with his high-school hero, Swede Levov, a few years earlier—decides to put the record as straight as he can. He gets to work as a novelist—that is, imaginatively addressing the real—in order to make justice to the untold, larger-than-life existence of Coleman Silk: a pale African-American, who in the late 1940s “couldn’t wait to go through civil rights to get to his human rights,” and, in affirmation of the individual over the historical forces,



decided to silence, first, and erase, later, his racial belonging,<sup>51</sup> to disown his family and his former life so as to live in the ethnic guise of a Jew thereafter, until the grave.<sup>52</sup> However, this time Zuckerman takes on penetrating the psyches also of the other major actors in the events: Faunia, Les, Delphine, and, for just a page, Nelson Primus, Coleman's lawyer. The author impersonates and de-simplifies them, rendering them all realistically ambiguous, all victims of someone or something else (parents, spouses, wars), all human beings differently marked by the human stain. Zuckerman's imaginative recreation of the other proliferates and the "realistic chronicle" is here multiplied and interwoven together with the account of the events of the summer of 1998 (AP 89).

Brought out of his solitary confinement, Nathan Zuckerman reenters the world only to see that what he fled in 1993 still rages in the American society, and more than ever in the summer of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal. The falsification and trivialization of the individual identity and the ineluctable wrongness of our pictures of others are, also in this case, a central focus. Over the course of *The Human Stain*, multiple trite misconceptions about the characters accumulate from several sources. Zuckerman responds to this with his own kind of falsifications, his methodically detailed dives into his characters' existence, which are grounded on complicated and ambiguous pictures of life. This offers a counterpoise to the "banalization of experience," the generalization of the unique, and the annihilation of the detail that distinguish the other gossipy conjectures about the main actors in the novel, a tendency embodied in the figure of Delphine Roux (HS 209). Facing the "contradictory yet mutually entangling narratives" about Coleman and Faunia, we are asked to indulge in his perplexity about the men and women in the book and to doubt everything we read, replicating thus Zuckerman's own bafflement during the summer of 1998 (Rothstein "World" 199).

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<sup>51</sup> It is important to notice that Coleman's passing is not the result of a carefully meditated decision, but it is a process that takes several years to come to definite form. The first time Coleman passes as Jew—at the West Point boxing match—is clearly invited by Doc Chizner, his coach. I agree with Pia Masiero when she says that, "at least at this first stage, I would not say that 'Coleman's whiteness and Jewishness are established by the *erasure* of his blackness' (Franco 91, italics mine); I would rather say they are established by *silencing* his true racial belonging. As Toni Morrison perceptibly suggests, the absence of any specification concerning a character's racial background amounts to a clear affirmation of his whiteness. What holds true in fictions mirror what holds true in life" ("Narcissus," 237). At the beginning is right to talk about "silencing" his racial identity, which is even more evident in Coleman's relationship with Steena Polson, to whom he does not say he is Jewish, a silencing which leads to the debacle of the meet-the-parents lunch. As also Masiero says, it is only when passing becomes a decision onto which Coleman bases his life upon—that is to say, when he passes for Jewish with his wife-to-be, Iris Gittleman, and he disowns his family—that it is right to talk about "erasure" of his racial identity.

<sup>52</sup> Ross Posnock foregrounds how passing for a Jew is different than passing for white: "determined to choose his affiliation rather than suffer ethnic or racial ascription, Silk insists he is passing only because he wants to be free, 'not black, not even white... nor was he staging some sort of protest against his race' (120). What he feels compelled to surmount is 'ancestor worship' in any form, including his brother's life commitment to advancing the race. Seeking to be neither black nor white, Coleman shrewdly elects a third possibility—the equivocal form of whiteness that is postwar American Jewishness" (204). One must also add, however, that Coleman is naturally considered to be a Jew because of the circle he is in: first, with Doc Chizner, who usually coaches Jewish kids, at the West Point boxing match; second, in the Greenwich Village, where most graduate students like him are Jewish. This affiliation, therefore, is the most plausible in the specific temporal and geographical setting. The circumstantial reasons of Coleman's affiliation with the Jews then are as relevant as the subjective factors.

As the events unfold, we come to wear the shoes of the major characters through Zuckerman's guidance. Also in *The Human Stain*, Zuckerman bestows on us his own portraits of the characters together with contradictory evidence that invites us to doubt the accuracy of what we are told. Zuckerman's four subjects—Coleman and Faunia in particular—emerge as a composite of different variations on an unstated and unintelligible theme, their self. An authentic grasp of their subjectivities seem to loom ahead, but ceaselessly escapes the reader.

While we, for instance, come to identify Faunia with Zuckerman's version of her—which is nothing but an in-depth exploration of what Coleman told him about her—we do not even approximate her authentic personality, her real story. Being aware of this, Zuckerman wants us to question the validity of his Faunia: the congruity of her story, in fact, is constantly challenged by various rumors and contradicting information. When we arrive at her funeral, we envision her to be the quintessential victim: an illiterate mother of two dead kids, a violent Vietnam veteran's ex-wife, the object of her stepfather's abuses, the consumed cleaning lady, the lover of the novel's hero, Coleman Silk, and happily so. And yet, we hear rumors about a recent attempted suicide and an abortion; we hear Les's accusations that the fire that killed their children was her fault; we learn that her illiteracy is a lie used "to spotlight the barbaric self befitting the world" (HS 297); we learn from her father's companion that Faunia "got pregnant and had a child at sixteen—a child she abandoned to an orphan asylum. A child her father would have raised. She was a common whore. Guns and men and drugs and filth and sex. The money he gave her—what did she do with that money?" (301). What did she do with the money, indeed! Who is this Faunia? The conclusion is that there are several Faunias in the novel, and none we can consider as the real one. The contradictions are evident and evidently unresolvable. Our fundamental mistake is to grant belief to Zuckerman's Faunia, who is a fiction about the real thing, an artificial woman that arises from Coleman's own version of Faunia.<sup>53</sup> Zuckerman shows us that he based his imaginative forays into Faunia on his personal interpretation of his contradictory knowledge about the facts, on the kind of Faunia he believes—and wants us to believe—she was. By juxtaposing the contrastive versions, Zuckerman displaces our understanding of such characters. Nathan wants belief and yet, at the same time, he wants us to cast doubts on the characters as he presented them to us. Thus, Zuckerman

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<sup>53</sup> The same discourse on contradiction can be done about Les Farley. The Les Farley Zuckerman presents us in the various fictional forays and the Les Farley Zuckerman meets on the frozen lake in the final scene are two different entities: the first is a character invented by Zuckerman, the other is a character invented by Roth whom Zuckerman physically meets. The same can be said about Delphine Roux. This woman is someone who Zuckerman never actually meets, and therefore we cannot know how much wrong Zuckerman is. Yet it is important to notice a change between how Zuckerman sees Delphine Roux in the summer of 1998 and in the successive writing about her. In his sketches about her, Zuckerman is more sympathetic: Delphine is not simply stupid (as Zuckerman considers her to be in the summer of 1998) but she herself becomes a victim of a successful mother, of her inferiority complex, of her naivete, of her unrealized self, of her displacement, of her desire for Coleman.

subtly undermines our faith in his imaginative fabrications in order to disclose the fictionalization processes at work in our assimilation of alterity, he wants us to realize that in the comprehension of the other, “it’s up for grabs [...] as to whose guess is more rigorous than whose” (AP 77).

The narrative effort that is the root of our comprehension of the other, then, is at the heart of *The Human Stain*. One can see best how the novel illuminates this issue analyzing, first, how Zuckerman arrives at writing about Coleman Silk, and, second, how mutation is the basic principle of the manifold narratives that refers to the name Coleman Silk.

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In life and thus in literature, I have learned that there are certain moments when our urge to create stories is a matter of sanity. Those moments are when the cohesion of the stories we create about ourselves as well as about others is broken by incongruities, especially in the case of an unexpected ending. Trauma makes those stories suddenly incoherent, and consequently elicits their reconsideration and recomposition. It is in the face of trauma and death—the archetypal trauma—that our psychological need for consistency is at its peak, so intense as to drive us to our desk and give palpable shape to those stories through language. This is what happens to me: when the unexpected breaches into the artificial whole of my reality, I recur to the page and try to recover narrative integration. This is what happens to Seymour Levov: facing his looming end, he contacts an author so that he might write his tragic life-story, or so one assumes.<sup>54</sup> This is what happens to Coleman Silk: when his wife dies, he blames his persecutors, and goes to Zuckerman demanding that he write a book for him. This is what happens to Nathan Zuckerman.

As it occurs in *American Pastoral*,<sup>55</sup> it is an interpretative trauma that bewitches, bothers, and bewilders Zuckerman, and eventually prompts him to embark on a book about Coleman Silk. This

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<sup>54</sup> Considering that during the dinner at Vincent’s Swede Levov’s do not bring up the subject of the tribute to his father, one has to cast doubts on his real motivation for his being there. The dinner does not bring to any result. The reader can only speculate with Zuckerman about the real motive that led the Swede to contact the author; however, Zuckerman’s conjecture that the Swede asked him to dinner to tell his own story is highly plausible. Yet, as Zuckerman says, “To get me to write his story may not have been why he was there at all. Maybe it was only why I was there” (AP 88).

<sup>55</sup> Reading the American trilogy, one might notice how the process that sets Zuckerman to work in both *American Pastoral* and *The Human Stain* is all but identical, although presented differently in the two novels. First, Zuckerman meets his subject, and he is allured by him. Second, Zuckerman misinterprets his subject. Third, the subject dies. Fourth, Zuckerman learns from someone close to him a piece of knowledge that prompts a reconsideration of his interpretation of the subject. Fifth, Zuckerman meditates and asks himself questions about his subject’s life. Sixth, Zuckerman begins to work as a fiction writer about his subject, imagining a key moment of his trajectory, an imagining, inexplicable and almost magical, that sends him to his desk. Seventh, Zuckerman begins to write about his subject for months, and the subject becomes “the most important figure of [his] life” (AP 74), and comes to “run [his] existence” (HS 334).

pivotal moment in which Zuckerman recedes behind the scenes to present his work, however, takes place twenty-odd pages from the end—indeed, his work is most of what we have read from the start of second chapter until the end of the fourth. When Coleman and Faunia are dead Zuckerman returns as an active protagonist in the events: in “The Purifying Ritual,” the fifth and last chapter, he charts his progressive immersion in his dead friend’s story.<sup>56</sup> After Faunia’s funeral and the publication of the clytemnestra posting, Zuckerman finds himself appalled by the rumors and the lies that circle in Athena about Coleman and Faunia, by the belittling narratives into which the couple is cast. After the accident, Zuckerman says, “everybody was writing *Spooks* now—everybody except me” (290). Yet it is not his disgust about the lies about his friend and his lover that leads Zuckerman to write about Coleman. The interpretative trauma occurs at the funeral, where he meets Coleman’s sister, Ernestine, who, unlike her brother, is distinctively African-American. Indeed, it is in their conversation that follows, and one of the last scenes of the novel, that Zuckerman learns his friend’s great secret—his passing as a Jew for most of his life. In the light of the huge amount of new information, Zuckerman is stunned and no longer capable of imagining his friend. Coleman, the man he believed he knew, turns into a giant question mark.

I couldn’t imagine anything that could have made Coleman more of a mystery to me than this unmasking. Now that I knew everything, it was as though I knew nothing, and instead of what I’d learned from Ernestine unifying my idea of him, he became not just an unknown but an uncohesive person. (HS 333)

The story of the Jewish professor with a conventional background is suddenly invalid, an elaborate fabrication of Coleman’s. The friend whose company was so invigorating for Zuckerman, the first friend in years, is incomprehensible, and needs a thorough reconsideration. The things that seemed are not the things that were. The wrongness of our pictures of others bursts in all its splendor. Faced with Ernestine’s major and minor revelations during their lunch together in the author’s cabin, Zuckerman is forced to reevaluate the narrative arch of his friend’s existence. Coleman’s rise and fall—his counterpunch to the historical forces that molded his country, his defeat to the history that is “the present moment, the common lot, the current mood, the mind of one’s country, the stranglehold of history that is one’s own time” (HS 335-6), the concluding, “ridiculous trivialization of this mastery performance that had been his seemingly conventional, singularly subtle life” (HS

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<sup>56</sup> Until Faunia’s funeral, Zuckerman takes part to few scenes in the novel: the early ones where he describes his friendship with Coleman, a friendship that ends with his visit to the dairy farm where Faunia works, and the Tanglewood scene, where he sees the couple alive for the last time. Considering the structure of the novel this is natural enough, but, in my experience, this is not the impression we have at that moment. When we arrive at the funerals, we maintain a feeling that Zuckerman’s direct involvement with the protagonists is larger than it is, because his role as the narrating and interpreting voice that guides us through the story.

334)—transform him, to Zuckerman’s eyes, into a thwarted hero of classical magnitude, an American Achilles undone by his country’s sanctimony. Questions heap up, without any answer. The meaning of Coleman’s trajectory eludes Zuckerman, and his neighbor’s “disaster,” “disguise,” and “secret” become Zuckerman’s “problem to solve” (HS 45). The fictional potential enshrouded in Coleman’s existence explodes in front of Zuckerman’s eyes, and the author remains the only countering force against the belittlement of that magnificent American life.

Once he has taken Ernestine back to Athena, Zuckerman goes to the cemetery to see Coleman Silk’s grave. Coleman is no longer accessible to Zuckerman. That figure now under the ground, that fed Zuckerman with the desire to live, that was one of Zuckerman’s few attachments to the external world hid within himself a man who spent a life battling his country’s history on his own, a man very different from the ordinary classics professor in a little western Massachusetts college. Coleman’s story, constantly vandalized by the rumors and the gossip, possessed a grandeur that only Zuckerman seems to grasp. Although bound by the limits of his meager knowledge, the author cannot but aspire to re-evoked the meaning of that existence, to make sense to what became incoherent and inarticulate. At that moment, the plausible begins compensating for the irresolvable unknown, the consistent counterlife for the unreachable life, the “realistic chronicle” for the unaccountable reality (AP 89). “Standing in the falling darkness beside the uneven earth mound roughly heaped over Coleman’s coffin,” Zuckerman says, “I was completely seized by his story, by its end and its beginning, and, then and there, I began this book” (HS 337). Starting from the blankness he perceived in the couple at Tanglewood, Zuckerman starts to imagine—magically, “inexplicably”<sup>57</sup>—the time when Coleman revealed his secret to his last lover, the first one he told in fifty years. And so it begins...

I waited and waited for him to speak until at last I heard him asking Faunia what was the worst job she’d ever had. Then I waited again, waited some more, until little by little I picked up the sassy vibrations of that straight-out talk that was hers. and that is how all this began: by my standing alone in a darkening graveyard and entering into professional competition with death. (HS 338).

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<sup>57</sup> Another example of the structural pattern that *American Pastoral* and *The Human Stain* share is the moment in which Zuckerman first imagines his subject. These two pivotal moments are nearly congruous. Whether Zuckerman is dancing with his high-schools sweetheart to the notes of “Dream,” or standing in front of his friend’s grave, Zuckerman responds to one question about his subject with a scene he imagines: the Swede kissing his daughter on the lips as a response of his mocking of her stuttering, in the first case; the time in which Coleman told his secret to Faunia, in the second case. Interestingly, Zuckerman cannot explain to his readers why he imagines such scenes. These two moment of impenetrable inspiration are enclosed in a magical aura. In *American Pastoral*, Zuckerman finds his subject in Deal, New Jersey, “inexplicably” (89); in *The Human Stain*, he waits for his dead friend to speak and there he picks up “the sassy vibration of the straight-out talk that was hers” (338).

In my first reading I did not grasp that in this moment Zuckerman asks us to reconsider and cast doubt on the veracity of what we have read up to that moment, that is, most of the book. If we go back to the beginning—as I did, on my second reading—we realize that, every time Zuckerman focalizes on another person, he is fictionalizing the real: each foray into the main four characters is an exploration of their existence, a possible fiction on how things went—their counterlives, in other words.<sup>58</sup> Coleman’s walk in the Athena campus that frames the second and third chapter, the story of his gradual passing, Faunia’s dance and her visit to the Auduborn society, Les’s dinners at the Chinese restaurant with his fellow veterans, Delphine’s classification of the university men, among other sections, are all inventions. As it was for *American Pastoral*, the novel is not an accurate portrait of someone, but a writer’s story—stories, in this case—about who he thinks they are. As Parker Royal writes, “Zuckerman’s own imagining, not the recounting of Silk’s ordeal, are the focus of the novel” (“Plotting” 118-9).<sup>59</sup> The author sets to make justice to Coleman’s life story, “its end and its beginning,” to narrate “his particular life as a created self” (HS 337, 335). He does so as a novelist: his aim is not truthfulness, but the creation of a structure in which the unforeseen is made sense of, the setting down of a catastrophe that, untold and unwritten, is “sans language, shape, structure, meaning—sans the unities, the catharsis, sans everything” (HS 170). *The Human Stain* is a portrait of Coleman’s existence, but “existence,” in Kundera’s words, “is not what happened, but the field of human possibilities, it concerns what men can become, everything he is capable of” (Kundera 68). By re-imagining his friend across his life’s trajectory, by presenting his tragedy as

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<sup>58</sup> That the forays into the main characters of the novel are Zuckerman’s impersonations of them should be clear to an attentive reader before the conclusion of the first chapter. Zuckerman’s exploration of Les Farley toward the end of “Everybody Knows” is particularly telling: it is a deep immersion in the psyche of the character, with its notable change of linguistic register (Zuckerman starts using Les’s vernacular English), and with very important pronominal shift from third to first person that signals in an indisputable way the fictional nature of what we are reading. The narratological characteristics of this sketch about Les Farley break the rules: Zuckerman goes beyond the ordinary human limitations of a homodiegetic narrative, and begins to act as if he were an omniscient narrator, when he is not. This omniscience needs explanation. Doubtless, the nature of Zuckerman as narrator cannot allow him to access that kind of knowledge—for that matter, that kind of knowledge of someone is humanly unattainable if not in fiction. Unless we take seriously the presence of a second omniscient narrator in the novel, the omniscience can be explained only by the fictional nature of that sketch. This same discourse can be done any time Zuckerman presents the reader aspects of characters that he cannot know or that are not humanly knowable. Therefore, when Zuckerman tells us he starts writing about Coleman and the other actors in the novel, an attentive reader should not be surprised. Zuckerman’s “proper presentation” prepares us to this revelation. Having said this, these considerations are all but easy to do during the first reading.

<sup>59</sup> Many reviewers seem to have failed to grasp the narratological complexity and the fictional nature of *The Human Stain*, and if they did they failed to mention it in their analyses. As Derek Parker Royal said, “while acknowledging Nathan Zuckerman as a significant presence, these critics work from the assumption that the story of Coleman Silk, as presented by Zuckerman, is more or less true: they assume in other words, that as a historian of Silk’s life, Zuckerman is a reliable narrator and compiler of facts, and that his narrative efforts (discourse) correspond to the actual events (story)” (“Plotting” 117). Also much of the scholarship tends to overlook this aspect, and concentrates on themes like ethnic definition, identity, American history, and intertextuality. The narratological aspects of the novel have been considered thoroughly only by Debra Shostak, Pia Masiero, Derek Parker Royal, and few others.

a professional of storytelling would, Zuckerman makes his attempt at making Coleman alive and whole again, at illuminating the causes, the motives, the consequences of Coleman's choice to live according to his own rules, at explaining to himself and to every reader the man Coleman was. *The Human Stain* is the life of Coleman Silk according to Nathan Zuckerman.

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It is important to clarify that Zuckerman never pretends to be writing Coleman's true story. As it is in life, in *The Human Stain* an authentic grasp of the truth is chimeric: "there is no bottom to what is not known," Zuckerman says. "The truth about us is endless. As are the lies" (HS 315). Zuckerman reiterates this concept over and over in the course of the novel, and one of the most memorable and most quoted passages is dedicated to this fundamental unknowability of the real.

Because we don't know, do we? *Everyone knows*... How what happens the way it does? What underlies the anarchy of the train of events, the uncertainties, the mishaps, the disunity, the shocking irregularities that define human affairs? *Nobody* knows, Professor Roux. "Everyone knows" is the invocation of the cliché and the beginning of the banalization of experience, and it's the solemnity and the sense of authority that people have in voicing the cliché that's so insufferable. What we know is that, in an unclichéd way, nobody knows anything. You *can't* know anything. The things you *know* you don't know. Intention? Motive? Consequence? Meaning? All that we don't know is astonishing. Even more astonishing is what passes for knowing. (HS 208-9)

Is it not paradoxical, then, that Zuckerman writes about what he cannot know? Not at all. Zuckerman never wants to pass his novel as factual or based on anything other than his limited knowledge of events. Indeed, he says to us that his imaginings are based on some facts he gathered during and after the funeral, but there is more than one narrative aside that, if not explicitly, is suggestive of the fictional nature of the novel. Beside the intrinsic fictionality of the impersonation process at the heart of the psychological incursions in the various characters, Zuckerman openly admits that he might be wrong in what he writes about the protagonist. When Zuckerman goes to Coleman's grave—that is, when he begins inventing portions of Coleman's life, when he mentally starts the book about his dead friend—features an admission of Zuckerman's inaccuracy and mistakenness: "I admit that may not be at all correct," I said to my utterly transformed friend. "I admit that none of it may be. But here goes anyway," and so begins the book—not for the reader,

though (HS 338). But Zuckerman is clear about the fictionality of his narrative endeavor also around the middle of the book as well, in an aside that closes the Tanglewood scene, and proleptically refers to the first scene Zuckerman imagined at the cemetery.

How do I know she knew? I don't. I couldn't know that either. Now that they're dead, nobody can know. For better or worse, I can only do what everyone does who thinks that they know. I imagine. I am forced to imagine. It happens to be what I do for a living. It is my job. It's now all I do. (HS 213)

This passage foregrounds how Zuckerman—like everybody else—responds to the unattainable knowledge of the real with the imagination. Here Zuckerman admits that he is the first casualty of the limits of what we can know. This does not mean that his imaginings have no concrete relation to the factual. “Every genuine imaginative event,” says Roth, “begins down there, with the facts, the specific, and not with the philosophical, the ideological, or the abstract” (F 309). In the novel, we gather much of the sources from which Zuckerman’s narrative springs: some for the events in the second and third chapter—Coleman’s visit to Primus, Coleman’s call to his son Jeff, Coleman secreting himself in the Athena campus—are stated in the passage that opens “What Maniac Conceived it?”; Ernestine Silk is the crucial source of information, and we learn that Zuckerman has dinner with the Silks; we know that the author is in possession of Coleman’s manuscript of *Spooks*. Even in this case, tracing the sources is interesting as far as it makes us meditate on how Zuckerman used them; however, there is no point in beginning to speculate about where Zuckerman found information about Coleman. To some extent, we are bothered by the fictionality of what we are reading, but, as I have tried to demonstrate throughout, Zuckerman’s completion of his defective pictures of reality by making things up is how our brain functions, how our reality functions. Zuckerman’s portrait of Coleman is as inaccurate as our portrait of our best friend. Is it less real because of the imaginative work behind it?

Indeed, justice to a life can be done only in a narrative. Zuckerman works not only to counterweight all the lies, the rumors, the “disproportion between Coleman’s ‘heroic conception of life’—his ruthless expunging of his past—and the banality of what tripped him” (Posnock 206) but also to make Coleman’s life intelligible. We need those imaginative stories we tell ourselves because unmitigated life is often unbelievable. As Aharon Appelfeld said, as he talked with Philip Roth about his childhood experience during the Holocaust, “the things that are most true are easily falsified. [...] reality can permit itself to be unbelievable, inexplicable, out of all proportion. The created work, to my regret, cannot permit itself all that” (S 27-8). This is the very reason for which, on the day of Iris’s death Coleman asks Zuckerman to write *Spooks*:



If [Coleman] wrote the story in all of its absurdity, altering nothing, nobody would believe it, nobody would take it seriously, people would say it was a ludicrous lie, a self serving exaggeration, they would say that more than his having uttered the word ‘spooks’ in a classroom had to lie behind his downfall. But if *I* wrote it, if a professional writer wrote it... (HS 11)

*The Human Stain* dramatizes the disbelief in the real in ways second only to *Operation Shylock*. In order to make the story credible, Zuckerman has to make the story work to the eyes of the reader. By and large, the reader does not care about whether what one reads is real or not; he believes it if it is believable, coherent, and meaningful. On the first reading of *The Human Stain*, one puts his faith on Zuckerman unremittingly, despite crystal clear indications that most of the text is imagined—I did. The human mind is not made to absorb the absurd, the unforeseen, the inexplicable, the “uncontrollability of real things” (OS 69)—indeed, reality can easily defy our comprehension. This is why we create stories to cognize the real: comprehension comes not when something *is* real, but when we *believe* it to be real.

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Every subject is invariably chained to the perspective from which it is seen: its definition depends not so much on what is defined but rather on who defines it. If I were to ask all the people who know me to write a brief portrait of who I am, none would be like another; and none would be like the one I would write. In fact, if I were to write several self-portraits about myself, none would be like another. If the self is a fluid, unstable entity based on metamorphosis that is brought together by a molding narrative structure, every attempt at discerning that kaleidoscopic subjectivity leads to a labyrinthine game of stories that go all in different directions. As we illusorily try to control the integration of our individuality with itself and with the world, our identity becomes malleable clay everybody works on as they want: in the hands of others, the foundational deformation of reality, its “reinvention,” is uncontrollable, it “never stops” (C 247).

Who is Coleman Silk, then? One of Zuckerman’s big problems is how to unify the myriad of stories that Coleman Silk incorporates. The ways in which Coleman is perceived by himself as well

as by other people are heterogeneous, fluctuating, and contradicting. Whereas Zuckerman provides us with his own interpretation of the man, we can detect the various trajectories that Coleman's subjectivity takes from the facts that in the book are presented as real, the facts at the base of Zuckerman's imaginative investigations. Whether we look at Coleman Silk from his own perspective or from other people's perspective, all we see is the metamorphoses of an individual in motion.

First and foremost, like Zuckerman's characters in *The Counterlife*, Coleman is a character who sets out to change his story, only that he does this in real life, and not exclusively on a fictional realm existing only in Zuckerman's mind. Coleman's perception of himself is anything but static: his identity is constructed on the individual freedom of self-determination. Coleman's passing as a Jew and the concealment of his true ethnicity is nothing but an audacious rewriting of an antecedent self, which, unchanged, would have been restrained by the history of race in America. His paleness gives him the opportunity to imagine himself beyond the boundaries of his ethnic roots and be "the man he has chosen to be" (HS 139). The gradual process of passing is initiated not so much by Coleman's clear desire to assume another identity as by the ecstatic freedom that the silencing of his blackness at West point, together with Mr. Silk's death, cause: "This had been purposed by the mighty gods! Silky's freedom. The raw I. All the subtlety of being Silky Silk" (HS 108). The raw I defies racial identification: it is neither black nor white nor Jewish, but is the exhilarating possibility of impersonation, the possibility of metamorphosis, the possibility to "go ahead and be stupendous, [...] to enact the boundless, self-defining drama of the pronouns we, they, and I" (HS 109). It is because of this freedom that he sets forth to rewrite his identity according to what he feels most fitting for himself—he creates his counterlife, and lives by it. Yet such a rewriting means to erase what was before, and it does not come without costs: the disownment of his loving family is the necessary sacrifice to enjoy such liberty, but the cruelty is so intense as to make a return impossible. His family history becomes a blank, in that moment, which needs to be filled with a fictional alternative to his African-American roots: what would be a credible family history of a young Jewish professor who does not want any contact with them? Then, Coleman becomes, according to Zuckerman, a descendant of the Silberzweig, whose surname was converted into Silk at Ellis Island; his father and mother died when he was in high-school and the navy, respectively; all documents about his childhood and youth disappeared when the landlord put all the contents of his house on the street when his mother died and he was away with the navy; an uncle,

with a bad reputation, who kept the old surname lives in California, but he is untraceable.<sup>60</sup> This is just an example of how Coleman must have re-imagined every experience of the first twenty-odd years of his life, in order to be believable in front of family, friends, and acquaintances, as a Jew. In the end, Coleman seems to manage his lie, and the alternative to his existence turns into his existence: for most of his life, Coleman is considered publicly as well as privately an ordinary Jewish academic, leading a conventional life. It is when life begins mocking his act with the Spooks affair that Coleman loses control, and life makes of him another man.

The first Coleman that Zuckerman presents is the uncontrolled, berating old man, with little of the self-possession of the ambitious faculty dean, consumed by his rage at his having been thrown out of his job at Athena college in the name of political correctness, in the name of an absurd misinterpretation of the word “spooks” by two black students. Not without some paranoid tendencies, he believes that the death of his wife, Iris, is the result of a university conspiracy against him, a death that he interprets as a murder of which he was the target. He vents his anger for two years into a non-fiction book about his absurd ousting and his supposed botched murder. We should not forget, however, that “radical change is the law of life” (C 312). It is in this moment, in the summer of 1998, that Coleman undergoes his last reinvention, the unexpected and unwanted one, which he embraces and fights for—a love affair with a much younger woman, Faunia, brings back the exhilaration and the desire for life, and make all the rage vanish. During the first Saturday night visit Zuckerman tells about, Coleman is a completely different man: a sprightly and shapely man in his seventies, still attractive, singing along Frank Sinatra and Vaughn Monroe, a man filled with life and energy, a “calm, unoppressed, entirely new being” that happily archived his unsuccessful two-year-long book project without much rethinking (HS 19). All this new life is infused in him by sexual rejuvenation—“she’s turned sex into a vice again” (HS 26). In the end, it is this final reinvention—as zestful sexed-up retiree—that turns out to be the risky one. It is not American history, but the lust in the moment when lust is supposed to be over that sends him, quickly enough, to his grave. The final reinvention, the final thrill before the eternal sleep.

As far as the reader knows, Coleman goes through at the very least four stages: we see the African-American young man, the Jewish professor and family man, the paranoid widower writing an enraged book about his ousting from university, and the rejuvenated lover of a much younger

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<sup>60</sup> This is the family history that Zuckerman imagines Coleman Silk gave to his wife and children. As many details in the imaginative forays into his characters, Zuckerman does not say whether one thing is true or not. This story might as well have been told to Zuckerman by Ernestine, who remained in contact with Coleman throughout his life, but the factual or fictional nature of this tale remains an open question. Nevertheless, it is very plausible: if it was not this story, Coleman had to invent a somewhat similar family history in order to explain himself to his own family, and Zuckerman’s speculation delineates a very valuable alternative, immersed in the a profound awareness of Jewish immigrant history.

woman. These are four different narratives through which Coleman defines and redefines himself, more or less willingly. Yet in the book, as it is the case in life, everybody—with the exception of Zuckerman and, possibly, Faunia—perceives Coleman as someone else entirely. We do not maintain the sovereignty over the narratives through which we are understood. Virtually anyone who comes in contact with him develops a distorted picture about him, each gets him wrong a little differently—to these people, Coleman becomes a man he is not. To Athena College, he is a racist Jew; to Les, he is a dirty old Jew; to Nelson Primus, he is a carelessly and irresponsibly revived retiree, to those who listen to Delphine Roux, he is an intruder and mischief-maker. Finally, the funeral's attendees witness a redrawing of Coleman as it happens. The funeral becomes the opportunity for Silk's offspring to "kosher" their father's reputation: the aim of Herb Keble's eulogy is to dismantle the narrative of the racist, and, by doing so, tacitly reprise the narrative of Coleman as the innovative dean of faculty (HS 312). Although Coleman seems to be a strong-willed, unified man, he emerges not only as a fluid character, but also as a chronically misapprehended man, a repository of wrong stories about himself—in other words, Coleman emerges as a common human being.

Coleman's impersonation of his counterlife as a Jewish man, however, is not always successful. When I began reading *The Human Stain* from the perspective of this work, it dawned on me that Coleman is nearly undone by narrative failures. "Thrown out of a Norfolk whorehouse for being black, thrown out of Athena College for being white," Zuckerman hears him say more than once (HS 16). It is in the moments when the unexpected barges into his "heroic struggle against the we" (HS 183) that Coleman loses his lucidity. In Zuckerman's reconstruction, the "worst night of his life" is when his self-assurance in being able to pass for white crumbles when a prostitute in a white whorehouse recognizes he is black: he is thrown out of the brothel, beaten, and ends up licking his wounds in a dismal black bar. His passing narrative is suddenly invalid. That humiliating night does not end Coleman's life as a white man as it could have, but, Zuckerman imagines realistically, it reminds him of the dangers of his struggle. Zuckerman supposes that it was in that night that he had "U.S. Navy" tattooed on his arm, the tattoo that becomes a telling symbol of the lesson Coleman learned on that night: the audacity of his secret endeavor cannot defy the persistence of the ineradicable.

The ineradicable biography was there, as was the prototype of the ineradicable, a tattoo being the very emblem of what cannot ever be removed. The enormous enterprise was also there. The outside forces were there. The whole chain of the unforeseen, all the dangers of exposure and all the dangers of concealment—even the senselessness of life was there in that stupid little blue tattoo. (HS 184)

However, the unexpected bursts in Coleman's life not only when his disguise is unveiled, but also when life begins to mock his grand performance. This is what happens when Coleman is ousted from Athena College for having referred to two black students as "spooks." The accusations of racism enrage Coleman not only because of their inherent stupidity, but, more importantly, because of the incompatibility of these allegations with his subjective narrative. How can he, who is black, be insulting two black students?<sup>61</sup> The affair is a comedy of errors: Coleman's disguise is the object of derision, and he does not want to play Malvolio. Coleman cannot cope with being subject to such ridicule, and this is why his rage becomes so uncontrollable and irrational: life, once again, fails to conform to his conception of himself, and befuddles him with its uncontrollability. The soothsayer's warning to Caesar becomes Coleman's own, the one that evokes his father's admonition at his passing, the warning that Coleman minimizes and instead comes to foreshadow his own disparaging fall— "Beware the ides of march" (Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, 1.2.19).

Although Coleman pertains to the long American tradition of self-reliance, his individualism runs opposite the conception of an integrated self, and at its core there is a desire to be free to change unrestrained by external forces, a desire to impersonate boundlessly. While *The Human Stain* is, needless to say, the protraction of *American Pastoral's* exploration of the impossible apprehension of the other, it also continues Roth's decades-long inquiry on the volatility and the instability of the self.<sup>62</sup> Coleman's parable teaches that at the heart of human life lies mutation, and its misapprehension. It is there that Zuckerman finds a grand example of the heights to which impersonation can be brought in real life, of the magnitude of the metamorphoses inborn in the act of living. This is what Zuckerman aspires to make justice to: the grandiose performance that is the

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<sup>61</sup> This rhetorical question does not take into consideration the possibility of Coleman's hatred of his own race, but, in this case, it is absolutely justified. There is no sign whatsoever that the main protagonist's passing is the result of self-hatred. As I have said, Coleman passes in order to live life according to his own desires, to affirm his individuality and freedom over the forces of history. Any attempt to read Coleman as a self-hating black is inappropriate.

<sup>62</sup> Not only in *The Human Stain*, but throughout the American trilogy Roth continues his investigation on the nature of the self began in *The Counterlife*. While Coleman is very self-asserting about his individual freedom, many characters in these three novels are wandering souls in search of the most fitting impersonation, of "the self that best gets one through" (C 320). Faunia and Les Farley are included in this category. After the bomb, Dawn Dwyer, Swede Levov's wife, loses the hold of her personality and the five years that follows turn into a quest, full of missteps, for a new woman. Yet it is in *I Married a Communist* that this theme takes a central stage: both of the central characters of Nathan and Murray's dialogic narrative, Ira Ringold and Eve Frame, spend their lives impersonating one different man and woman after the other in perpetual pursuit of the right one. They both die before they found out who they were. In an exquisite passage, Murray illuminates his brother's life-long hunt for himself: "He never discovered his life, Nathan. he looked for it everywhere—in the zinc mine, in the record factory, in the fudge factory, in the labor union, in radical politics, in radio acting, in rabble-rousing, in proletarian living, in bourgeois living, in marriage, in adultery, in savagery, in civilized society. He couldn't find it anywhere. Eve didn't marry a Communist; she's married a man perpetually hungering after his life. that's what enraged him and confused him and that's what ruined him: he could never construct one that fit. The enormous wrongness of this guy's effort. But one's errors always rise to the surface, don't they?" (IMC 319).

exceptional existence as an ordinary American man in the twentieth century.

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I am partial to *American Pastoral* and *The Human Stain*: these two were the novels that made me fall for Roth, the novels that taught me the power of the reading experience. As I wrote these pages, I was saddened by how much I was not saying about them, by the difficulty I have had in trying to convey on the page what occurred within me in my reading experience. I know I would find few people that would contradict me when I say that these two works are representative of the finest moment of Philip Roth's career, and a great moment for literature, but every work of art has its deterrents. Like the books on the bookshelf opposite my desk—the one dedicated to the Western canon, with Dante, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Chekhov, Conrad, Kafka, Joyce, Beckett—also the American trilogy is, to me, inexhaustible. These novels stand as mirrors in which we can see our humanity. As far as I am concerned, it is through reading and meditating and writing upon Zuckerman's counterlives about Swede Levov and Coleman Silk—and the characters' attempts to live on their own terms—that I discovered something more about our impossible knowledge of people, about the artificial stories through which we assimilate the real, about the meaning of living a life. Roth opened my eyes to aspects of our humanity I was not aware of, and this is what great literature is supposed to do. It changes, and makes you a different person. It does not matter when you read these novels—either upon publication, or ten years later, or a hundred years later—in Roth's mesmerizing voice, they will always tell us something important about what occurs between the cradle and the grave.



## Epilogue

### EULOGY OF THE DOUBT

*Life is And*

All the lives I could live, all the people I will never  
know, never will be, they are everywhere. That is all  
that the world is.

— Aleksandar Hemon, *The Lazarus Project*

Before the serious reader in me was born, I believed that books were not to be touched by pencil or pen. I began to abandon this notion when, reading as one should do, I noticed the usefulness of having the most interesting passages—and not only those—marked with a pencil, with horizontal and vertical lines. The underlined sentences become a road map of the novel, and at a glance one is



able to retrace the fundamental steps of his reading experience, to find in just few minutes that sentence that illuminates something peculiar about being human, that provide a new perspective on life. By now, my books by Philip Roth have so much work on them as to require new copies.

Once in a while it happens that I take a novel by Roth, and go through it, looking for that overly-underlined passage that speaks to me every time. There are countless memorable paragraphs or sentences whose power on me is unrelenting: from the much-quoted “I was wrong” paragraph in *American Pastoral*; to the paragraph in *The Plot Against America* that concludes with the sentence, “the terror of the unforeseen is what the science of history hides, turning a disaster into an epic” (PAA 114); to the paragraph in *Operation Shylock* that ends with Roth saying, “I left the front stoop on Leslie Street, ate the fruit of the tree of fiction, and nothing, neither reality nor myself, had been the same since (OS 198); to the many, many passages of *The Human Stain* I almost know by heart. If one would ask me to choose my single favorite passage in Roth’s novels, I would not be able to answer. Yet, if one asked me what is the passage that most condenses the essence of the author’s oeuvre, I would have little doubts. I would take my paperback edition of *The Counterlife*, and I would read a passage toward the ending.

The burden isn’t either/or, consciously choosing from possibilities equally different and regrettable—it’s and/and/and/and as well. Life *is* and: the accidental and the immutable, the elusive and the graspable, the bizarre and the predictable, the actual and the potential, all the multiplying realities, entangled, overlapping, colliding, conjoined—plus the multiplying illusions! This times this times this times this... Is an intelligent human being likely to be much more than a large-scale manufacturer of misunderstanding? (C 306)

This passage encloses what Roth’s novels are about. For fifty years, the author conducted a literary campaign against the oversimplification of the complex, against “the banalization of experience,” against the persistence of the cliché, against the prejudiced categories most people recur to in their everyday life (HS 209). The universe that Roth unveils to his reader is diametrically opposite to the one governed by the stereotyping attitudes of modern life. Roth draws a picture of the existence that is complex, ambiguous, and unclichéd. He investigates life in all its shapes and aspects, problematizing the moral gray area of life, insinuating the doubt on what we take for certain, scrutinizing the emotive dualities and contradictions, dissecting the limits of human comprehension. The reality of the Roth cosmos is not the reality as it is commonly assumed. If we think of it as the univocal truth of facts, Roth explores the spots where this notion cracks: his reality is manifold and multifaceted, mercurial and unstable, baffling and unknowable. In Roth’s reality, all our stories about the real, our fictions and illusions about the facts, our imaginative re-elaborations of the

palpable experience are included in their concrete actuality. We are the facts and the fictions, the real and the imaginary, the true and the invented. This is what Philip Roth presents to us: life stripped of the yoke of the unimaginative, of the identifiable, of the unambiguous.

Roth engages his reader in a provocative way. I do not refer to his graphic descriptions of sexuality or his comic irreverence—that is the easy provocation. I refer to his serious elicitation in the reader of doubts on the apparent convictions human beings rely upon in the everyday. He creates suspicion in our ideas of self and of the other, he evokes questions about life's aim and life's essence, he imbues skepticism in our pictures of reality. This is all great literature is about. Shakespeare is provocative. Austen is provocative. James is provocative. Joyce is provocative. Serious reading is all about provocation.

In these pages, I focused on one of these provocations in Roth's work. My effort lay in bringing to light Roth's dissection of how we apprehend the real in narrative form, and how we are authors of our reality. Things that we often take for granted—who we are, who others are—have an immense imaginative, narrative, and authorial component we often neglect. We compose our multiple selves and our pictures of others as if they were fictions. Before coming to Roth, I was not aware of this—in fact, only through the composition of this work I have become fully aware of it. This, for me, stands as the epitome of the motive for reading literature: in those imaginatively fabricated stories, there is something about ourselves we do not know.

In my attempt to make justice to the enduring dictums of literary criticism, my Philip Roth has turned out to be a rather bleak author. I want to conclude on another note. The doubts of a powerful novel can be unsettling, but in them there is the endless playful dynamism inherent in living. While Roth's novels can be filled with skepticism, they are also filled with an intelligent vitality that endures. With this, I conclude. My last note is Philip Roth's roaring laugh—the symbol of that intelligent exuberance that overflows in his splendid books.



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