PHILIP ROTH CONSIDERED

THE CONCENTRATIONARY UNIVERSE OF THE AMERICAN WRITER

Steven Milowitz

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Contents

Key to Abbreviations

ROTH

AL	The Anatomy Lesson
AMC	Author Meets the Critics
AP	American Pastoral
CL	The Counterlife
CRM	I Couldn'tRestrain Myself
CWPR	Conversations with Philip Roth
D	Deception
DOF	Defender of the Faith
E	Epstein
GC	Goodbye, Columbus
I-GC	Introduction to Goodbye, Columbus: German Edition
JG	Juice or Gravy? How I Met My Fate in a Cafeteria
LG	Letting Go
MIM	The Man in the Middle
MLAM	My Life as a Man
OS	Operation Shylock
P	Patrimony
PC	Portnoy's Complaint
POD	The Professor of Desire
PRC	The Philip Roth Collection
PRD	Philip Roth Sees Double. And Maybe Triple, Too
RMAO	Reading Myself and Others
SDII	Second Dialogue in Israel

TB	The Breast
TCFAG	The Contest for Aaron Gold
TF	The Facts
TPO	The Prague Orgy
WAJ-D	Draft of Writing About Jews
WSWG	When She Was Good
ZU	Zuckerman Unbound

OTHERS

AON	The Art of the Novel : Milan Kundera
BWA	By Words Alone:The Holocaust in Literature:Sidra D. Ezrahi
HBJ	Hiding Behind James : Adeline Tintner
HIGW	Henry James as Roth's Ghost Writer : Adeline Tintner
HLE	Half a Lemon, Half an Egg : Martin Green
HT	Holocaust Testimonies: the ruins of memory: Lawrence L. Langer
INTRO	Introduction: A Philip Roth Reader : Martin Green
K&T	Kiss and Tell : Hermione Lee
MAF	Marrying Anne Frank : Sanford Pinsker
NB	A Critic's Notebook : Irving Howe
OJ	Odd Jobs : John Updike
PR	Philip Roth : Hermione Lee
PRR	Philip Roth Reconsidered : Irving Howe
R	The Rapacity of One Nearly Buried Alive: Barbara K. Quart
RD	Philip Roth's Diasporism: A Symposium : Sidra D. Ezrahi
RM	Franz Kafka: Representative Man : Frederick R. Karl
RRN	Recruiting Raw Nerves : John Updike
SFD	Selections From Diaries, 1911-1923 : Franz Kafka
SOB	The Suburbs of Babylon : Irving Howe
SW	Selected Writings: 1950-1990 : Irving Howe
TCTH	The Comedy That Hoits : Sanford Pinsker
VOS	Versions of Survival : Lawrence L. Langer
W	The Treatment of Women in the Works of Three Contemporary American Writers : Barbara Quart
WOF	World of Our Fathers : Irving Howe

Preface

Victim of gross misreadings, Philip Roth's works require new close consideration. Roth has been misread not only in regard to obvious issues of autobiography, misogyny, and anti-Semitism, but, more importantly, in terms of conception. There has been, for the forty years of Roth's expansive career, an inability, or unwillingness, to acknowledge Roth's essential concerns. Roth's varied works, when studied closely, point to a central obsessional issue, the issue of the Holocaust and its impact on twentieth-century American life.

To claim Roth as a Holocaust writer might seem absurd to those readers who have witnessed Roth's rebellious outpourings, his insistence on not being read as a Jewish writer, his fascination with sex and power, his recurring discussions of the writer's lacerating effect on his personal world and on his self, his intense excavation of the continuous battle between parents and children, and his disquieting focus on the terrible internal war between desire and conscience, but it is the contention of this essay that any reading of Roth's oeuvre that ignores his primary impetus cannot truly locate Roth's place in American letters.

This book began as an attempt to account for a personal notion of continuity in Roth's books. His novels, stories, and non-fiction all seem intricately conjoined; he is one of the few current writers who is unafraid to mine the same territory over and over again, to deepen his investigations rather than just broaden them. Noticing the plethora of Holocaust allusions from Roth's early works to his most recent, I was struck by the meager mention of the Holocaust in reviews, articles, and manuscripts that attempted to elucidate Roth's individual and cumulative works.

In early reviews of Roth's celebrated and excoriated work, *Goodbye Columbus*, there is virtually no acknowledgment of the Holocaust's presence, though the book is anchored by "Eli, the Fanatic," which directly connects the experience of the contemporary American to that of the camp survivor. The first major study of Roth, *The Fiction of Philip Roth*, by John N. MacDaniel, published in 1974, concludes that Roth is a "realistic" writer, "whose central concern is with man in society" (vi). The society MacDaniel refers to is decidedly American. He expresses some agreement with the critics who view Roth as "an apostate, as one whose style and themes place him...outside understood notions of the Jewish traditions" (3). The oversight in this early study lurks in the ease with which MacDaniel understands Roth as a writer always and only pushing against tradition, never grasping to it. MacDaniel's myopia causes him to miss any Holocaust-imaginings in Roth's fictions.

Bernard Rodgers's 1978 study, *Philip Roth*, primarily looks at the "interpenetration of reality and fantasy in the lives of [Roth's] representative Americans" (9). Rodgers's view of Roth's characters as American first explains his suggestion that "as an artist Roth has placed his faith in Realism, not Judaism" (9). Though his faith may not be in the religious ethos of Judaism, Roth's writing is indepted to the Judaism of his subject matter more than to any literary method. But, for Rodgers, neither Judaism nor the Holocaust offer any interpretative fire.

Judith Paterson Jones and Guinevera A. Nance, authors of another study titled *Philip Roth*, look to the idea of self-definition as the locus for Roth's work, ignoring that self's connection to its historical place. The Holocaust's effect on individual's complex search for self-definition is not touched on in this otherwise comprehensive study.

Murray Baumgarten and Barbara Gottfried use their 1990 survey of Roth, *Understanding Philip Roth*, to "explore the moral complexities of modern experience" (7). They do mention the Holocaust, particularly in their discussions of "Eli,the Fanatic," and the Zuckerman books, and they note that Roth "was among the first American writers to bring into his fiction an awareness of how the murder of six million Jews by the Nazis has shaped the modern world" (11). This perceptive awareness, however, does not provide any pronounced discussion of how the world is shaped by the Holocaust, and how this new modern sensibility provokes Roth's harried characters.

The most recent study, *Philip Roth and the Jews*, by Alan Cooper, looks directly at Roth's need to grapple with issues particular to the Jewish experience in America, issues primarily about the internal wrestling with the felt allegiance to the Jewish past and to American modernity. He manages to find and investigate various Holocaust references but does not suggest that they cohere; for Copper the Holocaust is just one of the forces that effects characters' sense of self. Cooper claims that "most of Roth's fiction has dealt with life in [the] imperfect postwar world," but he does not give a cogent definition of what a post-Holocaust world truly is, how the fact of

genocide has altered the opportunities and imaginations of Roth's protagonists.

We live in America with the dream of the pastoral, the dream of paradise, plenty, and progress. America "was to be heaven itself" for the Jew, a world in which hopefulness could transform a brutal history (AP 122). But the pastoral is a false fantasy, as Swede Levov finds out in *American Pastoral*. The Swede tries to take "his family out of human confusion" (68), out of history, into a "post-Jewish" (73) America, but finds history, "the counterpastoral," searching him out, deposing his security (86).

"The tragedy of the man not set up for tragedy – that is every man's tragedy" (AM 86). Roth's work begins and ends in the tragedy of history, in the post-pastoral universe inherited from the fact of the concentration camps. How does one adjust to the "assailability, the frailty, the enfeeblement of supposedly robust things," Roth asks (AP 423). He has been attempting to answer that impossible question for forty years.

But what if all the quiet, the comfort, the contentment were now to end in horror?

- Franz Kafka
- *The Metamorphosis*

INTRODUCTION

Now vee may perhaps to begin. Yes?

> When you admire a writer you become curious. You look for his secret. The clues to his puzzle.
>
> -Philip Roth
> -The Ghost Writer

Powerlessness haunts post-Holocaust man. The knowledge that, ultimately, one has no power over one's life, that one can, in a moment, be labeled, numbered, and shipped off towards death creates a startling ever-present vulnerability. To know, intuitively, that all that one has and all that one is is contingent upon an undeclared power not intervening, not changing the rules of life—rules that were once assumed to be incontestable and unchallengeable—keeps one forever suspicious, forever unsure, embattled, entrapped. The truth of Joyce's declaration, "You could die just the same on a sunny day," becomes only one truth that inhabits and inhibits man. Precariousness is now not only a component of bodily well-being but of freedom, of the self's ability to create its own destiny. For those ever-aware of the nightmare of the Holocaust nothing can be assumed stable or sure. The freedom one feels today is only a reminder of that freedom's possible revocation.

The testimonies and poems of survivors and victims, the histories written and recorded, and the essays fashioned from those works, remark time and time again on the helplessness of man when he is deemed the inhuman enemy of a state's ideology. How to continue in light of that knowledge, how to find meaning, how to reinvigorate will, and how to reestablish choice, become essential questions. Fear replaces hope in the concentrationary

universe, the universe not only of the Holocaust-proper but of the new world created from its ashes.

David Rousset was the first to use the phrase, "l' Univers concentrationaire," as Sidra Ezrahi reports (10). For him, as for Ezrahi, the phrase describes the "self-contained world" of the concentration camp and "all aspects of the Nazi operation which were part of the master plan of annihilation and therefore common to most of the ghettos and camps" (Ezrahi 10). I have expanded the phrase to represent not only the place and period of the incarceration and extermination but the altered universe that is born as a result of unprecedented evil. It is as though, after the camps, the universe itself is impaired: hopes die, beliefs are more difficult to hold fast to, a pale hangs over the world.

In *The Professor of Desire*, Philip Roth's ninth novel, David Kepesh, a man whose tumult has reached a point of diminution, a man whose life has suddenly been brightened by new hope, expresses a profound, nagging fear of an unknown and unknowable oppressor. Having spent the evening listening to a Holocaust survivor tell his tragic tale Kepesh sits with his "innocent-beloved" girlfriend, Claire, and tells her the outline of "a simple Chekhov story" which describes his life: (261).

> Two old men come to the country to visit a healthy, handsome, young couple, brimming over with contentment. The young man is in his middle thirties, having recovered finally from the mistakes of his twenties. The young woman is in her twenties, the survivor of a painful youth and adolescence. They have every reason to believe they have come through. It looks and feels to both of them as though they have been saved, and inlarge part by one another. They are in love. But after dinner by candlelight,one of the old men tells of his life, about the utter ruination of a world, and about the blows that keep on coming. And that's it. The story ends just like this: her pretty head on his shoulder; his hand stroking her hair; their owlhooting; their constellations all in order - their medallions all in order; their guests in their freshly made beds; and their summer cottage, so cozy and inviting, just down the hill from where they sit together wondering about what they have to fear. Music is playing in the house. The most lovely music there is. 'And both of them knew that the most complicated and difficult part was only beginning' (259-260)

An ominous force, awakened by the survivor's oration, surrounds them. "Are you really frightened of something?" Claire asks Kepesh, after listening to his brooding summary (260). "I seem to be saying I am, don't I," he responds (260). As to what he's afraid of he tells her, "I don't know, really" (260). It is an unintelligible and uninterpretable fear rooted in history, ambiguous and menacing. It is the fear that Sydney, one of Roth's earliest protagonists, speaks of in Roth's first published story, "The Day it Snowed," the fear excited by the naive observation which begins the tale: "Suddenly

people began to disappear" (34). Roth's first published sentence resonates backward in time, resurrecting images still so vivid in 1959, images still undigested, still impossible to acclimate. Sydney's world is the world of the unexperienced and innocent child baffled by death's power. His vision articulates that of a young America shocked into awareness of systematic murder and dehumanization. Just as Sydney's first world is forever altered, turned "inside out," so too any post-Holocaust man's view of life is altered irretrievably (35).

"The Day it Snowed" is a story of the birth of the knowledge which presages death, as Sydney is, in a heavy-handed conclusion, "crushed" by a "big black hearse," a reminder not only of death's whale-like strength but of its allegiance with mechanization (44). The hearse announces the death of childhood and of the pastoral. Roth's first fictional landscape is a post-Holocaust, post-lapsarian, post-pastoral landscape, a landscape at once terrifying and empty. The world in Roth's work is one of surprises, one in which people disappear inexplicably, as simply as snow can fall, seemingly out of nowhere.

The world is, in Roth's words, "crooked and unreal;" it is a place wherein "one feels less and less power" over one's life (RMAO 187). It is a place for which "the inevitable end is destruction, if not of all life, then of much that is valuable and civilized in life" (RMAO 187). This is the world that Roth thrusts his young protagonist into, only to have him quickly devoured by it.

In "Goodbye, Columbus" Neil Klugman recounts a dream about himself and a little black boy he has met at the library. The two outsiders are placed onto a boat that, under its own power, takes them off shore: "And though we did not want to go, the little boy and I," Neil explains, "the boat was moving and there was nothing we could do about it" (74). Like unwilling passengers on a destinationless boat, Roth's characters search for a way to regain control of their lives. But each character is struck with the "terrifying inkling," which Willard Carroll describes early in *When She Was Good*," "that there were in the universe forces...immune to his charm...remote from his desires...estranged from human need and feeling" (5).

One feels oneself a potential victim of a numinous extrinsic power, a Kafkaesque fiend which threatens at every turn. Like Kafka, the young Peter Tarnopol, in *My Life as a Man*, wonders if his life will be one of "Eviction? Confusion? Disorder?" (244). For Peter, as Kafka expresses in his *Diary*, misery "happens whether you like or no," and whether you expect it or no (268). Returning to the home he had a day earlier moved away from, having momentarily forgotten that he now lives somewhere else, he is impaled with terror "to find the door...wide open and to hear men talking loudly inside" (244). His world, he feels, has suddenly been taken from him. This terror comes not simply because of a childish error of memory but more importantly it is born from a world view that recognizes the barbarity of life, the tenuousness of safety. "One minute it's sunlight and the next dark," explains Leo Patimkin (GC 113). "All of a sudden, pfft!' exclaims Epstein,

"and things are changed" (218). The momentary nature of one's happiness and of one's comfort is a constant source of anxiety for the characters inhabiting Roth's texts.

Some give into dismay, becoming misanthropic shells, appearing "round-shouldered, burdened," as though in flight from "a captured city" (GC 118), and some "reach out" and "grab" whatever they can get their hands on, whatever momentarily salves their pain (E 221). Some latch onto an ideology and some embrace nihilism. Some mortify their flesh and some become all-consuming carnivores. And then some few manage to neither fall into despond nor to become salacious sybarites. Some manage to negotiate a tense balance between their opposing desires and drives, finding a way to live in the unsure and devalued universe.

In that universe not only are things changed in an instant but they are changed, ostensibly, without reason or meaning. "The power to alter the course of the age, of my life and your life, is actually vested nowhere," Roth quotes Benjamin Demott approvingly (RMAO 177). There seems, in many cases, no one to assign blame to for one's personal pain. The confusion Sydney feels in "The Day it Snowed" is exemplary of the confusion of many of Roth's subsequent protagonists. Sydney asks, "What did I do? Why does everybody have to disappear on me?" (42). The question foreshadows to Novotny's query, in "Novotny's Pain," Roth's 1962 story of a soldier with a recurring backache, as to why, "Good as he had been - industrious, devoted, resolute, self-sacrificing - he would never have the pleasure of being a husband...or a comfort to his mother in her old age?" (266). He wonders, "What had he done in his life to deserve this?" (270).

And Kepesh - the same Kepesh whose fears rest not even on the quietest, most peaceful, evening of the year - must ask himself, when miraculously, horribly, he is turned into a breast, "WHAT DOES IT MEAN? HOW COULD IT HAVE HAPPENED? IN THE ENTIRE HISTORY OF THE HUMAN RACE, WHY PROFESSOR KEPESH?" (27). Characters are thrown into situations that defy understanding, that defy logic, that defy words, that defy explanation. It is as if Hardy's malevolent 'immanant-will' rules the lives of these twentieth-century men. Though the doctors tell Kepesh he has experienced "a massive hormonal influx or an endocrinopathic catastrophe, and/or a hermaphroditic explosion of chromosomes," no one knows with any degree of certainty what has caused his disfigurement (13). "Evidently," Kepesh realizes," nothing that has happened can be blamed on anyone, not even on me" (53). As Roth states, "Not all the ingenuity of all the English teachers in all the English departments in America can put David Kepesh together again" (RMAO 69). Nathan Zuckerman's back pain, in *The Anatomy Lesson* is, like Novotny's pain and like Kepesh's transformation, unclassifiable and incurable, its source impossible to uncover. In 'Courting Disaster' Zuckerman admits, "I tended, like a student of high literature or a savage who paints his body blue, to see the migraines as standing for something, a disclosure or

'epiphany'" (MLAM 55). But, as Zuckerman learns, quite often pain stands for nothing, has no retrievable cause, no substantive meaning. Things, simply, fall apart.

Epstein's rash is thought to be "prickly heat," a "sand rash" (212), or even "The syph" (216). Like the others before him Epstein insists "He was innocent," as if this declared innocence would cause the rash to disappear (217). 'Philip Roth,' in *Operation Shylock*, borrows the Jungian formulation, "the uncontrollability of real things," to express this unexplainable uninterpretability of life (237). Smilesburger calls it "Pipikism," "the antitragic force that inconsequentializes everything" (289). Giving it a name, though, does not contain or control it; nor does it soothe the fearful heart of those for whom it is a potential victimizer.

Connected to and working in tandem with all that oppresses invisibly and for no ostensible purpose are those discernible and recognizable powers that consciously and knowingly constrict man. They are what Roth refers to as "The Powers that Be," and range from the restrictive state to the restrictive religion, from the restrictive parent to the restrictive self (RMAO 3). When Epstein cries out in desperation, "When they start taking things away from you, you reach out, you grab," the "they" he attaches blame to are all those powers which conspire against the individual (221). "You Must Change Your Life," Rilke writes, and in Roth it is interpreted as a command. You, the powerless, the small, must change, a decree, not a suggestion.

In *Letting Go* Gabe Wallach comes in contact with Harry Bigoness, a representative figure for all the forces that stand above the individual, unswayed. Bigoness, Roth points out, "can't be moved by [Gabe's] intelligence, by his money, by his persuasiveness, by his moral code" (CWPR 9). The Big Ones - the ones who are in control, whose strength appears limitless, whose impersonal authority and dispassion resonate in all lives, whose decrees are meted out, whose words are acted upon, whose language is corrupt and corrupting - are ubiquitous. Of Gabe's encounter with Bigoness, Roth states, "I wanted him to come up against, at the end of the book, something that was indeed larger than him, but something that had nothing to do with being more intelligent or even more charitable than he was" (CWPR 9).

Bigoness is a concrete illustration of that force that Willard comments upon, and that Sydney, Novotny, Kepesh, and Epstein feel haunting them in every shadow. Incarnations of Bigoness are revealed in the McCarthyite actions of Mr. Wendell, in "You Can't Tell a Man by the Song he Sings," who documents both teachers' and students' behaviors and opinions on "a big card" which, he assures everyone, "would follow [them] through life," and which portends disaster for the left-leaning Russo (246), in the residents of Woodenton, who force the quiescent Holocaust-survivor, "the greenie" (281), to give up his clothes, to whom he appears to ask, "The face is all right, I can keep it? (283), in what Alexander Portnoy refers to as "this Holy

Protestant Empire" (43), in the officials and agents in Prague who follow both Kepesh and Zuckerman throughout their short visits, in the equally intrusive Israeli agents who tail 'Philip Roth' in Israel, in the Major League Baseball Association, the "Holy Baseball Empire," in *The Great American Novel*, which denies Smitty's entreaties, denies even Smitty's memories, and most hilariously in the figure of Tricky Dixon, in *Our Gang*, the personification of the tyrannical and the false, a parody of all political potentates, all dictators (16).

Dixon is the embodiment of what Norman Manea, in *On Clowns: The Dictator and the Artist*, calls "the white clown," the stark, cold, autocrat, exemplified for Manea in the figure of Nicolae Ceausescu (41). Manea contrasts the White Clown with Auguste the Fool, the subdued artist who "simply refuses" to let the White Clown dictate his life (49). But, Auguste is no dissident leading the charge against tyranny; he is, instead, the fearful, schlemiel-like man who, when forced into submission, must resist, who admits proudly, "I couldn't restrain myself" (8). It is this aspect of Manea's study that Roth finds most fascinating: "The battle not of the heroic but of the vulnerable, the weak and the unheroic to hang on and, stubbornly, against all odds, to resist their degradation" (CRM 3). For Roth, "no moral endeavor is more astonishing" (3).

This same fascination with the weak, the ordinary, the decidedly human, coming in contact and doing battle with various forms of coercion informs Roth's own fiction. It is not so much the Dixons and the Bigoness that intrigue Roth as much as those who manage to see through their hypocrisy and their lies, who manage to live in truth, in Vaclav Havel's phrase.[1] To give in to the powers that be, to submit one's self to the preset patterns of society is no remarkable feat; It is, in fact, the norm. Roth's prose focuses on how and why certain individuals, however unexceptional, are able to, to some degree or other, retain individuality in the midst of what Manea calls "the derailment of humanity itself;" how they do battle with the lie and with those who present the lie as truth (CRM 3).

This essential concern of Roth's explains his interest in oppressed European writers from Kafka to Klima, writers who investigate the individual in extreme situations, in conflict with powerful dehumanizing and corrupt political systems. His own works bridge the gap between Europe and America, focusing on the less overt ways in which man is stripped of individuality.[2] In contrast to the obvious manipulation of an authoritarian state the American reality is more obtuse and complex. There is no clear White Clown, no single Dixon to place blame upon. Roth's work speaks of the more subtle ways in which man loses his self: conformity, banality, blind patriotism, cliche, stereotype, trivialization, mechanization, a laundry list of methods and enactors of, what Noam Chomsky calls "manufactured consent," the unquestioning and obedient trust in one's world (Said 302). What Chomsky sees as "the effects of a generation of indoctrination" Roth writes in response to, pitting his frightened, groping, protagonists against various

automatizing agents (Said 302). From Sydney's mother, whose attempt to stifle his growth through euphemism and lie, to the Mossad, which asks 'Philip Roth' to censor himself, these agents act, often effectively, to keep the individual in line, under control, essentially imprisoned.

Again and again characters attempt to "cut loose from what binds and inhibits" them, most often doing battle with the twin imposing threats of "the oppressiveness of family feeling" and the "binding ideas" of religion, threats which stretch across the spectrum of body and mind, the heart and the head, and which are employed synecdochically for all that represses man (RMAO 9).

Both forms of pressure are present in Roth's early, celebrated story, "The Conversion of the Jews," a story used often to explain Roth's initial impetus to create, a story usually viewed as a "moral-fantasy" (Jones & Nance 28), or, as Roth puts it, a "day dream," wherein oppressors are "magically" (CWPR 85) humbled by the young Ozzie Freedman, the personification of "the urge for individualistic freedom" (Jones & Nance 29).

Ozzie rebels against the obfuscations of his mother and of Rabbi Marvin Binder, dissenting from the illogical dogma that the students who surround him accept without disquiet. Ozzie, unlike his fearful peers, is disinclined towards "closed-mouthedness," questioning Binder on Binder's easeful rejection of the Immaculate Conception: "Jesus is historical" (139). Ozzie, refusing to digest, unconsidered, the words of authority, asks Binder, "If [God] could create the heaven and earth in six days, and make all the animals and the fish and the light in six days....and He could pick the six days right out of nowhere, why couldn't He let a woman have a baby without having intercourse?" (140-141). Ozzie is a literalist, confused when lessons learned do not correspond with new lessons or with behavior. He has wondered "how Rabbi Binder could call the Jews 'The Chosen People' if the Declaration of Independence claimed all men to be created equal" (141), and why during "free-discussion time" he feels so unfree to express what is on his mind (144).

The suggestion, most critics make, is that Binder, Mrs. Freedman, and Yakov Blotnik - "the seventy-one-year old custodian" who mumbles incoherent prayers to himself and whose thought are "fractionated...simply: things were either good- for- the-Jews or no-good-for-the-Jews" (150) - "come to represent the narrow and sterile religiosity from which Ozzie wishes to escape" (McDaniel 85), and that Ozzie is a "spiritual activist" (McDaniel 82) who moves from a constricting spiritless world to "one of spiritual freedom" (Meeter 20). Bernard Rodgers is the primary proponent of the Ozzie/Roth parallel. He calls Ozzie's action a "revolt against...xenophobia and closed-mindedness" and likens it emphatically with "Roth's own artistic revolt" (22).

These readings, defensible though they are, miss the substance of both Ozzie's 'revolt' and Roth's artistic program. For these readers the story lacks any irony: Ozzie is heroic individualism and the three elders repressive soci-

ety and religion. There is no doubt that Roth uses this story, on one level, to exact criticism on those platitudinous and doctrinaire religious and secular authorities who refuse to answer or consider questions, who expect acquiescence, and who mouth the words of God without understanding what they are saying. And yet these villains are less villainous than at first imagined.

"Rabbi Binder," we are reminded, "only looked dictatorial" (149). In fact he is an unimposing and easily humbled figure, who, against the group chant of "Jump," maintains his plea, "Don't Jump! Please, Don't Jump" (153). Mrs. Freedman, a widow, is presented as a gentle and sad figure who "didn't look like a chosen person," and who, though she strikes Ozzie does so "for the first time," and without vigor (143). And Yakov Blotnik is clearly no danger to anyone, saddled with an "old mind" which "hobbled slowly, as if on crutches" (150). Though they are, indeed, single-minded and cliche-ridden they are not formidable threats; rather, they are combatants easily vanquished.

Ozzie, in many ways, is the aggressor, not merely questioning his teacher's words but insisting that the answers he receives are not sufficient, constantly claiming, "What I wanted to know was different" (141).Their conflict is essentially generational, the elder secure and dogmatic, the youth quizzical and unsatisfied with anything but faultless logic. But, where Binder attempts to answer Ozzie again and again, albeit with banalities, Ozzie rejects his answers outright, firing the accusation, "You don't know! You don't know anything about God!" (146).

It is Ozzie, not Binder, who is described as feeling both "Peace" and "Power" (149). It is Ozzie who becomes a Christ figure dancing on the rooftop to the chant of his earnest disciples, "Be a Martin. Be a Martin" (155). It is Ozzie who forces all into the "Gentile posture of prayer" (157), and compels them to "say they all believed in Jesus Christ" (158). Ozzie renounces Binder's binding dogma in favor of Christianity's, replacing Binder's cliches with his own: "You should never hit anyone about God" (158) He becomes so sure, so finally certain, that he leaps from the rooftop without fear, a believer. Ozzie, who only wanted definitive answers finds his answers in the "catechizing" of the Jews, in the language of another religion (158). His rebellion is less than "a fragile one," as Sanford Pinsker asserts; it is a fundamentally empty rebellion, a rebellion not towards freedom but towards more restrictiveness (TCTH 14). Ozzie, who initially seems to be "protesting his individuality," loses his individuality not to Binder, Blotnik, or to his mother, but to his reliance on the language of established Christianity, the language of dogma, to his assertion of power and surety (Deer 357). The story turns in upon itself, ironizing the simplicity with which Ozzie seems to find freedom.

To claim Ozzie Freedman as the personification of the activist's revolt against constrictions is to apply a facile and superficial reading to a story that demands a more complex explication. The outward simplicity of the

language that Roth employs seems to invite uncomplicated interpretations. Saul Bellow chastises "The Conversion of the Jews" for being "absolutely clear" (42), and Joseph Landis states, "The point is... altogether too clear (166). And Roth, in a 1966 interview, suggests that his reading of the story is no more sophisticated than many readers when he asserts that he is no longer "at one with the ideas and feelings that had caused it to be written" (CWPR 8). Roth's statement applies to a story that is only about the absolute rejection of authority, a story which enacts a revolt. If the more complex reading is applied the story is seen as questioning both authority and the individual, both the rebel as well as the object of the rebellion.

In any reading, though, Ozzie's revolt is not commensurate with Roth's artistic program, as Rodgers claims it to be. To argue that Binder, Blotnik, and Mrs. Freedman "personify all that Roth was determined to reject in the attitudes of the Jewish environment which had surrounded him for the first eighteen years of his life" Rodgers paints a picture of Roth's work as overtly polemical, as didactic, as the work of a rebel rather than of an aesthete (22). Rodgers's claim is based on Roth's own argument that "an author's work can and should have a social impact" (61). He adds: "To Roth that impact would appear to be a subversive one" (61). Such a view of Roth places him side by side with Ozzie, a child attempting to overturn his world with an act of conversion. Roth is not such a simple subject. Rather than encouraging rebellion he investigates it in all its forms. Rather than derogating authority he questions and scrutinizes it. "I wouldn't write a book to win a fight," Roth contends, making clear his refusal to see art as a vehicle of rebellion (CWPR 193). "If you ask if I want my fiction to change anything in culture," Roth states, "the answer is still no," further subverting Rodgers's argument (CWPR 186). Roth, unlike Ozzie, embraces no position to overturn another. His fiction resonates with his "distrust of positions" of all kinds (RMAO 71). To see Roth's burgeoning writing as equivalent to Ozzie Freedman's escapade on the temple roof is to begin to study Roth from a mistaken angle.

Roth's first critics, those rabbis and readers who vehemently decried "The Conversion of the Jews," "Epstein," and "Defender of the Faith," offered Roth a much more virulent disapprobation than Binder's for Ozzie, and Roth's response has been more considered and sophisticated, more tinged with irony and doubt, than Ozzie's intuitive response. Roth's early stories were called "dangerous, dishonest, and irresponsible" (RMAO 205). He was called an "anti-Semite" and "self-hating" (RMAO 25), and was accused of "informing" on Jews by representing the lecherous Grossbart, the lusting Epstein (RMAO 217). "You have earned the gratitude," wrote a rabbi, "of all who sustain their anti-Semitism on such conceptions of Jews as ultimately lead to the murder of six million in our time" (RMAO 218). "I hated you personally every sentence of your story," another reader wrote (PRC).[3] "Medieval Jews would have known what to do with him," a "rabbi and educator in New York City" voiced (RMAO 216). A literary discussion group wrote to *The New Yorker*,

after studying "Defender of the Faith," "We have discussed this story from every possible angle and we cannot escape the conclusion that it will do irreparable damage to the Jewish people" (RMAO 216). Requesting an answer to their complaints the group concluded, "Cliches like 'this being art' will not be acceptable" (RMAO 216).

Roth responded not with cliches but with unremitting earnestness, writing not only his 1963 essay, "Writing About Jews," (which summarizes and addresses those complaints) but with detailed individual letters written to rabbis and other readers. He decried their narrowness of vision, their inability to see his stories as investigations of various types of Jewish men and woman, both righteous and limited, both driven and conscience-laden, both deceitful and forthright. His book was not simply a categorizing of the evils and weaknesses of Jews, not "rassenschande," but an attempt to "redeem the stereotype," to understand and uncover both the truths and falsities embedded in the stereotype, to explore Jews as human beings, fallible and real (SDII 75). "The hope of the fiction writer is to tell the truth about experience and phenomena," Roth argues, in a draft to "Writing About Jews," not hiding ugly truth and celebrating laudatory truth (11). To adhere to his critic's suggestions, to succumb to their fear of fomenting "fuel" for anti-Semite's fire (RMAO 206), to create art while constantly asking, "What will the goyim think?" is to allow one's freedom to be taken away, to allow a restriction to be placed upon the imagination, to turn one's work into agitprop (RMAO 212).

Likening his critics to McCarthyites and to the Russian government in its persecution of Boris Pasternak, he views their exercise as an attempt at "denying me my freedom and making me obedient to their will" (WAJ-D 11), arguing that "the only response there is to any restriction of liberties is 'No, I refuse'" (RMAO 221). Roth places the responsibility on the I, the individual, to hold fast to his sense of self by not adhering to the censoring powers, by 'writing in truth,' as Havel might term it.

Ozzie does not retain his self-hood in "The Conversion of the Jews." His recurring question, "Is it me? is it me?" reveals his loss of self (148). The language describing his actions on the roof indicate a boy out of control: "The question came to him," "he discovered himself no longer kneeling," "his arms flying every which way as though not his own," "he hadn't really headed for the roof as much as he'd been chased there" (151). He is a boy without volition, jumping because the crowd calls for it, using a language not his own. The individuality he asserts at the start of the story has disappeared. His revolt has failed. Roth's revolt is, by contrast, not only against the narrowness of his Jewish detractors but against narrowness in general. Roth resists all "untenable notions of right and wrong" (RMAO 206), using his fiction to locate "all that is beyond moral categorizing" (RMAO 207).

At the center of that resistance is an exploration of the self, the way in which a man holds back and falls victim to entrapment, the way in which a man entraps and liberates himself. "You Must Change Your Life" is not only

a potential threat but, as Martin Green points out, a reminder of "the process of self-indictment" (PRR XXII). The struggle inside is as perilous as the struggle outside, the powers that inhabit a man more trying than the powers that be.

For the writer the "imaginations' systems of constraints and habits of expression," and not the critics' disdain, offer the most profound problems (RMAO 13). It is the self's limits that need to be traversed if writing is to succeed. The writing self is stymied by guilt, by fear, by history, by experience, and by indissoluble literary paradigms. Roth claims that he writes and reads fiction "to be freed from my own suffocatingly narrow perspective on life" (RMAO 120). Elsewhere he states that successful literature "allows us for awhile to be free" (WAJ-D 6). Roth's work springs from this conception of literature as potentially liberating and transforming. Like his characters the urge, the necessity, to maintain individuality, whether in style or content, is Roth's most difficult and imperative task. "What is it to be what I am?" his characters ask themselves again and again, determined to discover themselves without recourse to a preconstructed formula(I-GC 1). The discovery of the self and the retention of individuality and freedom amidst a debasing and deindividualizing world and a tortured and confused body and mind are concerns central to Roth's artistic drive, concerns which spring forth from Roth's overriding interest in the Holocaust and its lingering effects on twentieth-century man.

In an interview about the Zuckerman trilogy with *The London Sunday Times*, in 1973, Roth says of the Holocaust, "If you take away that word - and with it the fact - none of these Zuckerman books would exist" (RMAO 136). In fact to take away that word would be to erase Roth's canon. For Roth the Holocaust is the contemporary equivalent of what Harold Bloom terms Kafka's "Judaism of the Negative" (12). What in Kafka is the understood as the darkness "of the future," becomes in Roth the darkness of the past (Bloom 12). What Kafka feared and imagined became real for Philip Roth's generation; the penal colony became the death camps.

Instead of recognizing Roth's essential concern with the Holocaust and with its power to hold sway over the next generation, critics tended to use the Holocaust as a linchpin for their criticisms of his work, insisting that Roth degraded the memory of the victims by his critical and all too human portrait of Jews. In those early expressions of outrage the Holocaust is consistently invoked. Marie Syrkin's words are representative of the barbs lodged at Roth. She calls *Portnoy's Complaint* a work "straight out of the Goebbels-Streicher script" (RMAO 300). As Roth sardonically points out, "Had she not been constrained by limits of space Syrkin might eventually have had me in the dock with the entire roster of Nuremberg defendants" (RMAO 300).

Critics like Syrkin contended that not enough time had passed to write so openly about Jews. Jews, they asserted, should be exempt from criticism, their recent history made them unique, separate from other men, needing

to be insulated, written and spoken about referentially, only as passive victims and heroic sufferers. For Roth the fact of the Holocaust makes it essential not to stoop to propagandizing for the Jews, not to cower in fear of the repetition of history; to present Jews as men and women, not categories, as individuals, not indistinguishable members of a group. After all, what is the fundamental difference between the Nazi picture of Jews as "wicked," and wicked only, and the fearful Jewish claim that Jews are "perfect," and perfect only? (WAJ-D 14).

Roth recognizes the validity of the fears expressed, just as he recognizes the anti-Semitic threat as real. "The difference between us," Roth writes of his critics, "is in how we choose to respond to the threat" (WAJ-D 13). While his critics espouse silence, prettified pictures, and timidity, Roth suggests vociferousness, honest, if sometimes ugly, pictures, and boldness as ways of exploring Jewish and American life after the Holocaust. It would be "an insult to the dead" six million to use their memory to stifle the artist's spirit (RMAO 221). For Roth, "The suggestion that we act willingly now the way certain Jews, in horror, grief, and shock, were forced to act then, provokes in me an outrage equaled only by my disbelief" (WAJ-D 15). To act as a victim when the victimization has ended is to hand the enemy a final victory. Roth's work is so centrally concerned with the I because it is the I that the Holocaust-architects tried to strip away. "Hitler killed nerve" (WAJ-D 18), argues Roth, and to allow nerve's death to infect the survivors is to "continue to be Hitler's victims" (WAJ-D 15). Roth's first responsibility, then, is to resist the impulse to censor himself in deference to the memory of the camps. The first I to liberate is the I of the writer.

As Sanford Pinsker points out, "If an older generation of American-Jewish writers had insisted, in Bernard Malamud's phrase, that 'All men are Jews!' Roth's vision was the converse -All Jews were also men" (TCTH 4). Roth individualizes men rather than grouping and universalizing them. Each Jew, in Roth, is differentiated from previous or future protagonists, each faces his own barriers, his own hurdles, and each responds according to his own strengths and limitations.

Many critics, including Irving Howe, find Roth's individualizing of Jews unconvincing, suggesting that Roth's Jews are de-judaized, their ties to Jewish tradition and history non-existent. Howe sees Roth as a writer submerging Jewish identity into assimilationist America, flaying the Jew from his roots, making him disappear into the mass, like Ellison's black paint disappears into a great American whiteness. Dorothy Seidman Bilik points to Roth's comments in a 1961 *Commentary* Symposium, to prove her point. In that debate Roth asked of Jews, "How are you connected to me as another man is not?" (351). However, rather than deciphered as a statement of disconnection from the Jews it is more accurately read as a declaration of connection to all men, not limited to Jews only. Jews are men, each attractive or repulsive on his own. This manner of viewing one's connection to Jews allows one a vaster perspective, allows one to deny that Jews are all one

thing, all the same. "And that is a good thing," Roth states in the same symposium, "for it enables a man to choose to be a Jew," to embrace his Judaism and his history by choice rather than by being "turned into one, without his free accession" (351).

His embrace of Judaism is a complex embrace, not simply the throwing of arms blindly around all Jews and all the patriarchal Jewish beliefs and codes but a more considered embrace, an embrace tinged with questions and with thought. Roth does not renounce his Judaism, nor does he turn away from its discomforting realities. On the contrary, Roth's emphasis on the Jew as man, on the Jew as willful and complex, springs forth from a painful need to remember and delve into the Jewish past.

What the Nazis attempted to take from Jews, and indeed from everyone, Roth attempts to reinsert in his fiction, using the Holocaust as a lodestar to point to the hurdles man must overcome. The most seductive hurdle the Holocaust exposes is the hurdle of ideology, the belief in a fundamental, absolute, indubious truth, a truth one must ascribe to unquestionably. In its denial of self and in its elimination of choice the enactors of the Holocaust relied on a strict ideology to enforce their will. Ideology presents itself as the most malevolent force behind all that worked to devastate and dehumanize man in Nazi Germany. The Nazi ideology insisted that the Jews were less than human, that they were cancers that needed to be excised.

In Roth's work, characters move across the spectrum of ideology and nihilism. No single stance is satisfactory because each embodies an aspect of the Nazi philosophy. The Nazi doctrine was not only a call to ideology but, as David Hirsch points out, "a call for a return to a primordial past...a regression to chthonic Dionysian drunkenness" (265-6). It relied not only on the "systematic" and the "ordered" (Ezrahi 255) in man but on the "unshackled" in him as well (Hirsch 265). The Nazis tried to harness neither side of man, allowing uncapped Dionysus to alternate with automatized and programed Apollo. No balance, no interplay, was reached between these contradictory sides of man. The Nazi, in this illustration, is half a man (though he feels himself to be whole, complete) turning one side of his self off while the other performs its horrendous duties. Roth's successful men and women find fullness in the tension between the two diverse sides of self, a tension lessened and engorged minute by minute but never subdued, never fully quieted. Unlike the Nazi, Roth's protagonist maintains a balance, unable and unwilling to allow either Dionysus or Apollo full control over him. He feels "painful points of friction," as Roth writes of the quintessential Rothian man, his father, a friction, he continues, "which yield[s], at its best, vitality, a dense and lively matrix of feeling and response" (MIM A-32). The maintenance of this friction, this balance, creates countless dilemmas, neuroses, terrors, hurts, and fears, but its maintenance is the only way to exist in a concentrationary universe.

The balance extends to Roth's style as well as to his content. Roth rejects the temptation "to imitate" narrative techniques "verified by authority"

(RMAO 8). He rejects "literary dogma" in favor of a more individual style, one which mixes genres, which mixes the past and the present, which mixes the vernacular and the literary, which uses models and breaks free from models, which forms new paradigms only to undermine and reconsider them. Speaking of *The Counterlife*, but useful for all his works, Roth notes, "The narratives are all awry but they have a unity" (CWPR 253). In that remark he locates the pull between form and formlessness, the need for both if a work is to have validity in the changed world. His works take literary techniques and genres - naturalism, realism, anti-realism, parody, satire, thriller, confession, love-story, biography, autobiography - and turn them in upon themselves, altering the reader's perspective by diverging from the established form, by undermining expectations. Roth's style, a cacophony, a hybrid, a bringing together and a stripping apart, can best be defined as impressionism, a style inextricably bound up with the individual, the I groping for vision, a style which both is aware of the ambiguity and unsurety of the world at the same time as it retains some solidity, some structure which holds back the urge for a deconstructionist denial of all form, all truth, all meaning.

The battle is between, what will be termed, Lonoffism and Pipikism, the ordered, ideological, strict, impotent, lifeless automaton and the "protean" (OS 185), the nihilistic, "the senseless," the driven, the lustful, the uncontrolled, the unbound animal (OS 389). To keep the tension between the two and to be aware of the split is to remain viable and vibrant, functioning and potent. To shut down one side and to give the other sovereignty is to fall into the cauldron of the concentrationary universe.

"The novelist," Roth says in an interview with Asher Z Milbauer and Donald G. Watson, "suffers from serious ignorance of his obsessional theme" (10). Whether Roth suffers from that ignorance is difficult to deduce, but it is clear that when a comprehensive survey of Roth's work is undertaken the Holocaust in all its manifestations, as history, as lesson, as harbinger, as memory, as coercer, as warning, is Roth's obsessional theme.

Unlike other American writers Roth was not hesitant to investigate imaginatively the stark facts of the Holocaust period. Sidra Ezrahi describes the "slow process by which the remote event eventually entered [American] literature (179). She notes that in America "few...writers possessed the resources from which an immediate response could be shaped" (176-177). The war literature of the forties, Ezrahi argues, "established the camps somewhere on the outer boundaries of human geography" (179). American literature of the late forties and fifties investigated "the fascist threat...but not the historical events of the Holocaust" (179). The fifties, she states, were taken up with "growing documentation by survivors and historians," but little substantive fiction was created (179). Ezrahi points to the trial of Adolph Eichmann in 1961 as "a watershed in the American perception of the Holocaust," the bell that awoke the slumbering or weary writers (180). And yet between 1958 and 1959 Philip Roth was already writing and re-writing a

play, titled "A Coffin in Egypt," which confronts the Holocaust directly, exploring boldly the experience of a Jewish ghetto between 1941 and 1943.[4]

The play tells its story in three relatively short acts. Act One sets the scene in Vilna, Lithuania, October 1941. Solomon Kessler, a former clerk, a simple man, "a man who has been deprived all his life" (26), a "mediocre failure," has just been made Mayor of the Jews of Vilna, by the Nazi Colonel Holtz (60). He meets with the Jewish council to explain that he is now "in charge of the Jews" (6) Rabbi David Meyer, the Chancellor of the Yesivah, refuses to acknowledge Kessler, refuses to compromise, as he will throughout the play. Rabbi Joachim Smolenskin, a wise elderly man, recognizes the need for compromise, the need to retain some Jewish authority in the midst of what he admits is an incomprehensible situation. Leo Rosenfeld, a communist, refuses, like Meyer, to respect Kessler's rule, promising him a revolution of workers. Kessler is told by Holtz that he will be able to make Vilna a prospering, culturally alive village again as long as each month he sends a thousand Jews to the extermination camps. Holtz explains that in sending a sacrifice each month Kessler will save countless Jewish lives. Kessler resigns himself to Holtz's terms believing that "Fighting them is impossible" (17). The first act ends with the first "Action" (10). An old man , the last of the thousand, asks, "What did I do? Why?" as he stops midway to the train (20). He asks Smolenskin, "Rabbi, who can be buried in a strange place?" and the rabbi tells him of Joseph's burial in Egypt, far away from the promised homeland (21). The man is taken away and hit by a Nazi guard. Kessler smacks the guard, telling him, "Never lay one finger" (23). The train pulls away and the citizens of Vilna begin the mourner's prayer as Kessler screams, "Stop it! Stop mourning! I forbid mourning!" (23).

Act Two takes place in December 1942, in an ostensibly revitalized Vilna. The coffee shop is filled with Jews; music is playing. The theater, the schools, the restaurants, have been reopened, and, as Smolenskin says, it is all "Kessler's doing" (26). The two rabbis and Rosenfeld argue their various positions, Meyer and Rosenfeld secure in their rightness, Smolenskin consumed by doubt. Kessler enters the shop like a monarch, an air of confidence about him, magisterial, in control. He tells those assembled of his plan to save ten thousand Jewish lives. Five thousand workers are to be shipped to Kovno, which will become a "Jewish worker's city," and five thousand of Vilna's vagrants will then take their places at work (28). Kessler appoints Rosenfeld the leader of the workers in Kovno. Rosenfeld, accusing Kessler and the Nazis of "breaking the back of the resistance" by sending "the young" and "the strong" away from Vilna, declines the appointment (38). For his non-acquiescence Rosenfeld is arrested. The train for Kovno is loaded with healthy, optimistic men and women. Kessler and Meyer watch the train begin its trip, Kessler fiercely proud of his accomplishment, Meyer bitter, enraged at the decimation of his beloved Vilna. The train, suddenly, comes to a halt and the young Jews are led from the train and are massacred in a maze of machine-gun fire. Kessler, horrified, despondent, screams,

"I didn't do it! I didn't do it!" (42). The act ends, once again, with the mourner's kaddish, chanted this time by Kessler himself.

Act Three takes place in August 1943. The Nazis are concerned about the approaching Russian army. Vilna, it seems, will soon be overrun. Holtz presents Kessler with a scheme whereby Kessler will assume guilt for all the evils perpetrated upon Vilna's Jews in return for an assisted escape to Sweden. Kessler, while thinking over Holtz's proposal, visits the ailing Smolenskin, who despairing, wants only to die. Kessler defends his actions, claiming that everything he did he did only to save Jews. He tells Smolenskin, "Everything was black and some of us stood in front of the blackness, and we made some gestures" (58). Kessler leaves the dying rabbi to supervise what might be the last Action. He is told that they are one Jew short of their quota. Kessler moves to a microphone and addresses the crowd. "The Russians are coming," he tells them. "Go home. All of you, go home" (59). Powerless to have his words acted upon he joins the doomed Jews. The crowd begins to chant the mourner's prayer as Kessler disappears into the train.

"A Coffin in Egypt," written virtually simultaneously with the stories of *Goodbye, Columbus*, recreates the Holocaust universe while pointing towards the post-Holocaust universe that Roth's next works will take as their setting. The play begins with an overwhelming assertion of power: the imposition of a puppet government to both subjugate and palliate the frightened Jews of Vilna. Kessler's appointment is not put to a democratic vote; the Jewish council is dissolved in a moment. The power thrusts itself upon Kessler and the villagers, taking control of their lives. But that power is invisible, always at a distance, always removed. Kessler answers to Holtz, Holtz to an unseen Berlin. "I resent," Holtz tells Kessler, "that you are making this seem my idea" (13). "Kovno," he says later, "was Berlin" (48). But Berlin remains in the shadows. The power seems to emanate from nowhere.

It is not only invisible but uninterpretable. It seems to act counter-intuitively. "I don't even begin to understand," Smolenskin says. "Cossacks I've seen, pogroms I've seen. But this, giving people yellow cards, counting them off, putting them on trains, some still carrying their fiddles, their china" (17). There is no model, no precedent, to compare to the Nazi assault. All designations, all forms of knowledge and of language are undone. "What did I do?" cries the old man (20) In this new world innocence is no defense against punishment It is a world, as Primo Levi reports, in *Survival in Auschwitz*, without "Why" (7).[5]

It is a world where the strong are murdered and the mediocre are rewarded. It is a world where the definitions of good and evil are overturned. Are Kessler's actions good because they save lives or are they evil because they advance the Nazi campaign? Are Meyer and Rosenfeld good because they admonish Kessler or are they evil because they would rather submit everyone to a collective death. rather than compromise with an outside power and give up their own authority? The attack upon Vilna's citizens is more

than an attack upon their bodies; it is an attack upon all that they have believed in, all that they have spoken, all that they know. It is an attack upon their sense of themselves, on their humanity. A mammoth power has arrived not only to conquer but to control, to strip its victims of their very status as human beings.

Each character reacts to this assault in a different manner, depending on his/her former life, preconceptions, and ardent beliefs. Rosenfeld uses communism as the redemptive ideology to challenge the Nazi ideology. To him Kessler is a "Fascist" (56). A true believer in the workers, in the coming of a world revolution, in Stalin as god-head, Rosenfeld promises Kessler, "There will be a new era" (56). Rosenfeld derives his strength from this belief, a belief which gives him the will to refuse Kessler at every turn, to mock and threaten him. But Rosenfeld's ideology is as limited as the Nazi ideology that he rebels against. He mimics Stalin and Lenin as Hitlerites mimic Hitler. He considers nothing, doubts nothing, sees the world in black and white. His revolt, then, is an empty one. Like Ozzie, he merely substitutes one ideology for another. He never aspires to individuality; his ideology keeps him strong but costs him his identity.

David Meyer's refusal is, like Rosenfeld's, initiated from ideological ground, his ideology being that of Orthodox Judaism. Meyer is forever quoting the bible, suggesting that martyrdom is the only solution for Vilna's Jews. For Meyer compromise is out of the question, those who do, whether they save lives or not, are collaborators, traitors to their religion. Smolenskin responds to Meyer's simplistic assertion of superiority, asking him, "How can you be so holy? How can the rest of us be so wicked?" (27). Meyer, like the Nazis, attempts to brand each man holy or unholy, hero or murderer, human or beast, "messiah" or "butcher" (36). There are no gradations. Ideology provides him with a sense of rightness, but it takes away his ability to consider, to think and rethink, making him robotized, inhuman, making him the epitome of the undone, victimized Jew.

Smolenskin resists the urge to condemn or criticize too quickly in favor of a more balanced and thoughtful approach to the unendurable situation. He is an appeaser, a realist, offering sympathy for the victims while maintaining his connection to those in charge. He tells Meyer, "A dead Jew helps nobody. We take from the Germans what life we can" (27). Smolenskin is a man of decency and of wisdom, his philosophy antagonistic to ideology.

But with his faith pulled out from under him, his town denuded, his fellow Jews at war with one another, he gives in to despair, banishing himself to his bedroom, hoping for death. When Kessler encourages him to recover the rabbi responds, "I don't have the ambition" (53). He has given up, surrendered himself to the degradation that has been foisted upon him. He appropriates the posture of a dying man though his health is fine. Nihilistically, he lies down and closes his eyes, becoming a martyr to hopelessness. Meyer and Rosenfeld find sanctuary in ideology while Smolenskin finds his sanctuary in emptiness. All eviscerate their selves.

Solomon Kessler moves within both frames, only to escape from the binds of each to unfettered self-hood. Initially he is an empty vessel, a man whose heart is "a plug of iron," a man cut in half (15). "For thirty-seven years I went through life I didn't feel a thing," he remarks (39). He is an automaton, moving through each day by rote. Thrust into a position of power Kessler finds his missing half, he finds purpose. "I...believe in what I'm doing," he says with passion (39). He finds an alternative lifestyle to his previous structureless life. He develops faith in his power, believing it to be legitimate. When he announces his plan for Kovno he says triumphantly, "They have made a concession to me. To me!" (34). He tells the Nazi guards, "I'm in charge here" (23).

But Kessler's language betrays him. He tells a crowd, "The basis for existence in the ghetto is work," echoing the Nazi cliche, "Work makes man free," exposing the extent of his indoctrination into the Nazi lexicon and dogma. In the throes of power he displays his inherent impotence. He is a puppet, mouthing the oppressor's words, no more human than he was when a non-feeling clerk. Kessler tells Smolenskin, "I suddenly was given a life, not of a bug" (55). He believes he has experienced a reverse metamorphosis, that he has finally become a man. But even in his expression of this found freedom he displays his debt to a controlling power. He is 'given' a life; he does not create or choose a life. As long as he acts as the Nazi representative he is never free.

It is when doubt enters his consciousness that he begins to extricate his self from its confinement. When Holtz asks him, towards the end of the play, "What have you been in this for in the first place?" he responds, "I don't know" (51). His belief in his role has evaporated and he is liberated. When he disobeys Holtz and tells the Jews to detrain he knows his life is in jeopardy, he knows his action will be ineffective, he knows that he has given up all roads to escape. His act of refusal is a potent act, an act born not from ideology nor from despair but from will. In the midst of the dehumanization of all that surrounds him he exercises choice thereby denying Holtz and Berlin their victory. Kessler finds, in the convergence of the twin sides of self, a freedom that no other character is able to uncover.

The battle Kessler undergoes augurs the battle Rothian man suffers time and time again, attempting to keep each side vibrant without relying on ideology or grabbing hold of nihilism. Ambiguity is the stance Rothian man finds most satisfactory, a questioning back not a rejection, a searching but not a discovery, a way of living with the "blackness" without allowing it to devour. The play itself ends ambiguously, a mourner's prayer spoken but for whom it is unclear. For Kessler? For the thousand on the train? For the mourners themselves? Or, perhaps, for the changed world, for the future, for the next generation whose duty it will be to recover meaning, to recover hope, to recover language, to recover faith, to recover the covenant, all without forgetting and without demeaning the memory.

In the end, the play asserts, it is the individual who is responsible for his own redemption. Roth's characters must risk appearing as fanatics to the world if they are to maintain their individual integrity. Two types of fanatics are illustrated and explored throughout Roth's work: The fanatic who follows blindly an ideology and the fanatic who rebels against conformity. To resist fanaticism of the first order Roth's characters must often embrace fanaticism of the second order, appearing insane to those indoctrinated many. Kessler's final action may appear as the gesture of a fanatic, the futile gesture of a man outside society, but it his his one authentic gesture, his one true assertion of self.

"A Coffin in Egypt" introduces the historical period that shapes the attitudes and visions of the characters and that shapes the very language of the texts themselves, the world that informs, impels, encourages, and entraps the next world. The situation in Vilna is not only the epitome of the situation of twentieth century man but is also the base memory that intrudes upon the more staid post-1945 world. When not involved in their own battles against disintegration Roth's characters are reflecting upon their separation from the world Vilna represents, and their connection to that world.

Never again will Roth make the Holocaust world his setting, never again will he so nakedly immerse himself in its horrors, but never will it cease to be the central subject of his work. It remains on the periphery, awakening, enervating, and informing. Its relative silence makes its force altogether more powerful.

The mix of silence and of speech is essential to Roth. His work is structured on dichotomy, on tension and balance. To write only and always about the Holocaust in its stark reality would serve to trivialize its weight, but to leave it out is impossible. Roth's work is assimilationist; it relies on a "two-way engagement," as Roth says of true assimilation: Silence and verbosity, head and heart, past and present, desire and conscience, ideology and nihilism, literature and life, all interact creating an explosion of lively tension, a burst of energy (MIM A32). It is the energy of conversation, of commingling. The conversation reinvestigates history, reimagines time, reinterprets literature, spurns cliche and stereotype, dehumanization and vulnerability, to salvage a taste of truth.

The concentrationary universe removes certainty. It creates an abyss and warns against a descent into that abyss. It demands memory and demands that memory not inhibit truth. It makes authority suspect and the invisibility of authority portentous. The man in the concentrationary universe is anxious and uneasy, fundamentally powerless. How to overcome that powerlessness and write is Roth's first concern. With language so debased how is a writer to explore the multi-faceted altered world? It is this question which Sydney asks throughout "The Day it Snowed:" How to find words to comprehend what is incomprehensible. Language resists the attempt but the attempt must be made.