MILOWITZ

PHILIP ROTH CONSIDERED

THE CONCENTRATIONARY UNIVERSE OF THE AMERICAN WRITER

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Steven Milowitz

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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
HJGW	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

Contents

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-