

Up Society's Ass,  
Copper

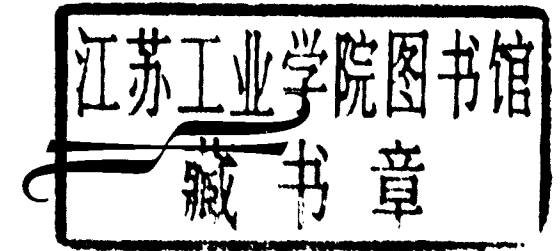
*Rereading Philip Roth*



Mark Shechner

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*For my father*  
Herbert Shechner  
*1914-2001*

Updike and Bellow hold their flashlights out into the world, reveal the real world as it is *now*. I dig a hole and shine my flashlight into the hole.

—Philip Roth, interview with David Plante

The most basic formula of a highly developed culture — a formula which transcends all particular contents — may be suggested by designating it as a crisis constantly held back.

—Georg Simmel, "The War and the Spiritual Decision"

The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom.

—William Blake, "Proverbs of Hell"

Up society's ass, Copper!

—Alexander Portnoy

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## *Acknowledgments*

The effort of writing a book may feel isolated, but in fact those of us who do this sort of thing live in an echo chamber of voices. They infiltrate us and take up posts inside our heads. Ted Solotaroff once observed that he wrote for “a few good voices in my head,” and it occurs to me that I do also and that moreover I am always talking to those voices, as if my lonely monologues were really flourishing dialogues. Writing, even in a cork-lined room, is like finding oneself in a morality play with angels at each shoulder, urging one to go left or go right, say it all or keep something back, write extravagantly or play it safe and observe the unspoken decorum of critical prose. It makes for extreme self-consciousness. I find it hard to write a sentence without calling to mind someone else’s incomparably finer ones. But then, without those other voices, how do we discover our own? Over the years I’ve benefited immeasurably from conversations with Jeffrey Berman, Robert Boyers, Melvin Jules Bukiet, Sarah Blacher Cohen, Frederick Crews, Morris Dickstein, Leslie Fiedler, Andrew Furman, Mark Krupnick, Bonnie Lyons, Sanford Pinsker, Thane Rosenbaum, Jeff Rubin-Dorsky, Elaine Safer, Ted Solotaroff, Stephen Whitfield, and Hana Wirth-Nesher. In addition to these, countless critics and reviewers have chattered avidly and incessantly about Roth over the years, and I’ve profited from more of them than I can name. Those whom I might single out in particular include Robert Alter, James Atlas, Harold Bloom, Anatole Broyard, Robert Cohen, Richard Eder, Alain Finkielkraut, Richard Gilman, Eugene Goodheart, Jay Halio, Hermione Lee, John Leonard, Zöe Heller, J. Hoberman, Irving Howe, Frank Kermode, R. B. Kitaj, David Remnick, Richard Stern, John Updike, and James Wood. In addition, I never fail to find Michiko Kakutani and Norman Podhoretz entertaining on the subject of Roth. And Derek Royal, who keeps an online bibliography of Roth on the Web, has given me a running start on my own efforts in that direction.



Since I have been writing about Philip Roth virtually as long as I have been writing, most of these chapters were previewed and tested in newspapers and periodicals. Portions first saw light in *American Literary History*, *The Bookpress* (Ithaca, New York), *The Boston Book Review*, *The Buffalo News*, *The Nation*, and *Partisan Review*, as well as an anthology, *Contemporary American-Jewish Novelists*, edited by Joel Shatsky and Michael Taub. Parts of this book have appeared in somewhat different form in two previous books of my own, *After the Revolution: Studies in the Contemporary Jewish-American Imagination* and *The Conversion of the Jews and Other Essays*. With a few exceptions, all previous essays have been substantially edited to the point of being new essays.

My thanks too to the editors at the University of Wisconsin Press, for their patience and hard work. Bob Mandel and Tricia Brock have been model editors, and Adam Mehring has done Herculean work in cleaning out the Augean Stables of the original manuscript. My thanks to all. And to Nettie, *sine qua non*.

The cover drawing of Roth is by the artist R. B. Kitaj, from his book *First Diasporist Manifesto*. It appears here courtesy of the artist and Marlborough Fine Art, London.

Up Society's Ass, Copper

## Introduction

### “Because I Do What I Do”

Toward the end of *Operation Shylock*, the novel that marks the high point of Philip Roth's engagement with Israel, the book's lead character, one “Philip Roth,” meets in a New York deli with a man code-named Smilesburger, a retired Mossad agent. “Roth” has asked Smilesburger to read the manuscript of a book recounting his adventures in Israel, where he engaged in some serious skullduggery for the Mossad. In the course of conversation, Smilesburger reveals to Roth that he is not, like him, a Jew of conscience and that he recognizes the Jews as the party at fault in the Middle East: “To make a Jewish state we have betrayed our history—we have done unto the Palestinians what the Christians have done unto us.” He also makes a remarkable disclaimer about his reasons for taking part in this expropriation of Palestinian lands and suppression of rights. If one day, he says, there should be a Palestinian victory and he was brought up on war-crimes charges, he would offer no defense for himself. He would not plead the history of anti-Semitism; he would not plead the millennial Jewish claim to the land nor the horrors of the Holocaust. Nor would he even plead the simple truth: “I am a tribesman who stood with his tribe.” He is prepared to say to his judges only that, “I did what I did to you because I did what I did to you.’ And if that is not the truth, it’s as close as I know how to come to it. ‘I do what I do because I do what I do.’”

It is a remarkable confession to find in fiction, where moral exculpation—being “redeemed” as the language of moral criticism has it—is



the norm, though such moral natures are hardly absent from political life. Whether there was ever an actual Smilesburger to say such a thing to the actual Philip Roth, we have no way of knowing, but his confession seems to stand as a statement of ultimate Realpolitik, that we do what we do because we do what we do, as it might be spoken with honesty by anyone whose hands are dirty from power politics, from Osama bin Laden to George Bush, from Yasser Arafat to Ariel Sharon. Although none would ever utter the sentiment so nakedly, we might indeed expect them to understand it: of themselves and of each other.

But might that not also stand as the novelist's ultimate defense of what he has written and whatever effect it might have on the world: "I do what I do because I do what I do"? Whatever else it does, it puts the writer beyond exculpation, beyond extenuation, beyond the need for any principled reasons to commit to the page whatever he or she finally commits to the page. It even puts the writer beyond psychology, to the extent that psychology provides sensible reasons and renders behavior morally palatable. And that I think is a happy place to be for a writer, finally, beyond having to justify, or to be justified: to be expected to be a moral agent of any kind. I'm certain that Roth would be no more at ease being mistaken for a moral agent than he ever was when mistaken, as he has sometimes been, for an immoral one, and while his books are brimful of ethical considerations—he is, after all, a Jewish writer—there is seldom a place where one can firmly place a finger on a moral issue and say for certain: "Here is where Roth comes down." Or, to isolate some particular psychological obsession and say, "Here is where Roth lives." That is not for reasons of postmodern indeterminacy, though Roth has sometimes taken refuge in it, but because it doesn't help any to do that. Roth's books don't become more available, nor do they take on new dimensions, when his hobbyhorses are put up in lights. We seldom if ever get closer to the heart of Roth's fiction by isolating the voice of responsibility. It's there, but no more important than the voices of terror, of loneliness, of mockery, of skepticism, of rage, of amazement, of comedy, of zealotry, of wild imagining. As for the voice of appetite, it is always on tap. Whatever else I undertake in this book, it is not an attempt to wrestle Roth to the mat and take his moral temperature: Roth does what he does because he does what he does, and in coming to grips with

his books I find it helpful to respect that intention and follow the example. This book too will do what it does because it does what it does.

There is no choice: a book that has been written in bits and pieces, in the form of occasional essays and reviews, over a period of almost thirty years can't reflect a single intention or even a single state of mind or voice. Nor can it be rewritten as something more integrated, complete, or thematically consistent. That's a shortcut to transforming whatever was immediate about the reading experience and putting it under glass, where it becomes a museum exhibit even as I am doing it. What I find myself most enjoying, as I reread these essays, is the afterglow of the original adrenaline rush, which I could not possibly fake in a more coherent book written in a long sitting. The short reviews were written while the books were still white hot for me, and while they may not finally reflect my final assessment—how could they?—they do remind me of Roth's unending ability to get a rise out of me after all these years, which is why I've continued to write about him. I respond, and I don't ask of literature much more than this: to be provocative, to engage me, to make me want more. How rarely does that take place!



How did I get here? I never know such things for certain, but here is how I think it happened. While still a graduate student in California I had read and been wildly entertained by *Portnoy's Complaint*, and I assumed that my pleasure was widely shared. How could it not have been? In the terms that I might have used then, I had found the book's combustible and self-lacerating comedy "right on," and had heard in Alexander Portnoy's hysterical, insouciant, and self-dramatizing voice something so familiar and resonant that I had taken the book to be something of a secret cousin. It was no accident that my first eleven years were spent in Philip Roth's neighborhood of Newark, the predominantly Jewish (at the time) Weequahic section, so that its voices, though grown dim from decades away, could be reawakened by the book's free surges of language and crazed parabolas of laughter. Indeed, I lived just across the street from the grammar school that also served as the Weequahic High School Annex in those days. Although I had left that neighborhood at the age of eleven, winding up eventually in California, and had not had

time to absorb the full culture of Jewish Newark, there was enough of it lodged dormant under my skin, like a sleeping virus, to be blasted into wakefulness by the book's careening and ironic comedy. What was not to like? I had no idea, and it took me a while to find out that the literary world is not built around my parochial enthusiasms. I was twenty-nine when *Portnoy's Complaint* was published, but to many things I was still sleepy.

By the time I became aware of the storm around the book I was an assistant professor, living and teaching in Buffalo, New York, and closer both geographically and in intellectual culture to what Harold Brodkey once called "the infinite oral thuggery" of New York City. For all I know, I was the only person in America who was taken by surprise by the double-barreled attack on Roth in the December 1972 issue of *Commentary*, which featured Norman Podhoretz's essay, "Laureate of the New Class" and Irving Howe's surly and agitated "Philip Roth Reconsidered." (Since this dustup will be discussed in detail later on, I'll simply allude to it here.) Even Roth, who had been taking blows for more than ten years, must have been on red alert for this. It certainly took me by surprise; the revelation that literary culture was a war zone was a wake-up call. I probably should not have been so surprised. I had spent the years from 1964 though 1970 in Berkeley and San Francisco and knew about cultural combat as a daily experience, one that exuded the pungent aroma of tear gas. But it was not easy in that time and that place to separate the spell of cultural revolution from the politics of antiwar and anti-what-have-you-got protest. It was something that took place in the streets, and it was not for many years that I learned that Lionel Trilling had called the cultural revolution "modernism in the streets" and looked upon it as a bad omen for Western Civilization. When it came to the academic side of life, the view from Berkeley was distinctly different from the view from Columbia: cultural warfare had not found a home in the west coast literary curriculum, not at least in any class that I ever attended. Things changed shortly afterwards. Someone said to me as I was leaving Berkeley for the east, "You're trading in Dickens for Dostoevsky." That sounded inviting. I couldn't wait. I was fast outgrowing California youth culture and was ready for some Russian soul and Dostoevskian strangeness, until I learned what it meant, the Kulturkampf around Roth being the Freshman Comp class

of my unsentimental education. How could I know that lower depths I cherished would take the form of a live and desperate Nikolai Raskolnikov on my bookshelf and a live Porfiry Petrovich hot on his tail?



In 1972 another piece of this adventure went beyond the thrill of having a Newark paisano out there who could portray an overbearing Jewish mother and a peevish son so accurately that he seemed a one-man survey research team with so many interviews under his belt that he knew, down to the least standard deviation, what such people were like. I had left California with a sense of inexorable and durable method under my belt and was itching to test it out in a live literary arena. It is a little embarrassing to talk about it now, but since intellectual Marxists are out there, even to this day, writing books about when and how the scales fell from their eyes—when they had their personal Kronstadts<sup>1</sup>—why not at least a few pages about my own version of that adventure?

I was a Freudian. Back then in Berkeley, a bright young assistant professor of English, Frederick Crews, was teaching graduate seminars in applied psychoanalysis and attracting disciples the way a magnet attracts iron filings. It wasn't hard to understand why. Those were heady days of radical thought in Berkeley, and in English, at least, psychoanalysis was the available radicalism. At that time there was no resident Marxist, save maybe a disciple of critic Leo Marx, and Marxism, in those days of home-brew revolutionism, when Friedrich Engels seemed as stolid as a plow horse beside thoroughbreds like Che Guevara, struck most of us as at least musty if not discredited. Whatever else was true, Crews had an odd and offbeat charisma for a radical. He was about the funniest guy going, and classes with him were a treat, no matter what we were talking about. The person we encountered in the classroom might talk about guilt like the Crews of *The Sins of the Fathers*, his book on Nathaniel Hawthorne, but the offhand manner was pure *Pooh Perplex*. For me, at least, if someone that consistently witty and ironic believed so strongly in Freudian theory, then it had a fighting chance of being true. (But let it be said that not even Lenny Bruce could have gotten me to read *Capital*.) We now know that Crews's doubts were festering even as he marched us through our classroom exercises of finding the primal scene in every human struggle and every rustle of

garden foliage—and boy did we ever find them. Mom and Dad were never so exposed for the mad fornicators they were as in that seminar! But in those classes, in 1967 and 1968, Crews never let on that we might just be finding what we had set out to look for, and we, in need of some classroom experience that could rival the drama and spectacle of the daily rallies at Sproul Plaza and weekly rumblings out on the streets, clung desperately to the dubious wisdom to be found in Freud's *Standard Edition*, as though it were nothing less than a voice out of the burning bush itself.

I have little recollection of the classes as such: maybe because finally they were more ordinary than I cared then to acknowledge. No, let's be honest. I was bored most of the time. But I have vivid recollections of evenings spent with Crews and members of the San Francisco Psychoanalytic Institute in one psychoanalyst's apartment on San Francisco's Nob Hill, where after drinks and hors d'oeuvres, analysts and lit critters alike sat in a circle and talked theory and literature for about two hours, until dessert came out and we got to freeloader amply on Napoleons and Courvoisier, afforded to us by the happy fact that psychoanalysis had emerged in Europe as the treatment of choice for a sexually obsessed middle class and had retained its association with affluence and high culture in the United States. It was certainly a break from the jug wines of student life, and if truth be told, it did not incline one to bouts of skepticism. It was a reassuring way to be young and intellectual in the vortex of a revolution, and as we drove home across the Bay Bridge in my friend Al's MGB, myself stuffed behind the bucket seats like a piece of collapsible luggage, I could only congratulate myself on my luck. Slogging through *Hamlet* week after week with the soigné heirs of the Freudian revolution was a small price to pay for being a privileged student in the back of a sports car roaring its way through the California night with my stomach full of cheesecake and brandy and my head full of the best that had been thought and said—sixty years earlier. Yes, it is true that during one of those soirees a senior analyst had taken me aside to confess that the contents of the Freudian unconscious were, in his words, "few, simple, and boring," but I didn't take it then for a warning, just a bit of late-night personal grousing about the dreariness of having to put up all day with so much kvetching. (A friend reported not long ago of having been fired by her analyst. "I don't want to hear any more

about your father," he had said. My sympathies were with the analyst.) It would be a few years yet until I would discover that he was absolutely right: few, simple, and boring, and one thing more—fictitious. That would come later, and Crews himself, having become the Sidney Hook of psychoanalysis, would happily help that reassessment along.

At the time this second storm broke over Roth and Portnoy in December 1972—there was an earlier one in 1969 that had driven Roth out of the country—I was casting about for something compelling to do. I had completed my graduate school project and was at loose ends. I didn't want to go any further with the grad school work: it wasn't gripping enough, and I wanted to be gripped. Out of the blue, I had a subject that didn't have to be chosen by lot from a shopping list of options. To take a phrase from WWF wrestling, Podhoretz and Howe had opened a serious can of whoop-ass on Roth, and like the tag-team buddy I fancied myself to be, I sat down and pounded out a riposte that surely didn't take me more than two weeks to write. It was an agitated defense of Roth against charges of being a willful writer "who imposes himself on his characters and denies them any fullness, contour, or surprise"; of lacking all patience for uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts, for "negative capability"; of being vulgar and reductive in his thought; of being a literary "swinger" and a slave to cultural fashion; and of being hampered by a "thin personal culture." These from Howe. After such disemboweling, what forgiveness? Was any hope of dignity left? It was a mugging, pure and simple, and I pegged Howe and Podhoretz for a couple of mugs. All of this is gone over in detail in a subsequent chapter and needs no amplification here, but it sent me flying wildly out of my corner, swinging from the heels. There was a second part to the exercise, much of which is now lost: an attempt to use my newfound tools, my keys to the treasure house of the unconscious, to get down to the bedrock of Alex Portnoy, as though he were my patient. In effect, while defending Roth against detractors, I could also bring Portnoy's strange "case" to light. That those two purposes might in fact conflict with each other did not occur to me at the time.

The entire exercise was exceedingly weird, but at least I had what I wanted: I had been moved at last, first by a book and second by someone else's insistence that my own literary passion—my first since falling hard for James Joyce—was utter trash. If Roth was "Laureate of the

New Class”—Podhoretz’s phrase—what was I, then? A face in that depthless crowd? So I rose up, with indignation as my sword and Otto Fenichel’s *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis* as my shield, and wrote about it. And, when I was done, I mailed it off to Roth.

Part of the strategy of that essay was to find a voice, something that was as far as I could get from the prefabricated jargons that were rampant in the profession I had chosen—and have, if anything, grown worse—and from the off-the-shelf middle style of compositional prose that was its immediate alternative. I had written nothing at all since finishing the book on James Joyce two years earlier and felt stymied both by the lack of a compelling subject and a way of writing that could bring ideas to life. By adopting for this diatribe-cum-routine a brash and unbuttoned style, the bratty style of the schoolyard, as it turned out to be, I was able to solve a problem of how to write about Roth without sounding like just another pundit, another sober and wearisome talking head. There would turn out to be problems with this style, including its inappropriateness to other subjects, but for a short while I was able to revel in the freedom that it afforded me; I was able to say things through it that the middle style of expository prose simply ruled out.

About all I remember now is that Roth did not altogether despise it. More than that I can’t claim. But the absence of complete contempt was all I really needed to summon up the courage to revise the screed and send it off to *Partisan Review*, where it was accepted immediately. Had Roth called ahead? Now, what I had sent to Roth and what was finally published in *Partisan Review* were substantially different pieces of writing. The first was a screed, a *cri de couer*, that lit out after Howe on grounds that the character he discovered and scourged in *Portnoy’s Complaint* bore distinct resemblances to the person he had anatomized in a self-revealing essay about his own youth, “The Lost Young Intellectual.” Howe, I had argued, was in effect tilting at mirrors. Uncertain of how that would fly at *Partisan Review*, I excised that part of the essay, and only recently rediscovered it for restoration in this volume. See chapter 3, “Only a *Weltanschauung*: Howe’s Lost Young Intellectual.” Without this section, much of the essay’s original polemical heat was damped and its velocity was throttled back to the ambling speed of a “study,” an “exegesis.” The middle style was creeping back.

There was another section, a piece of reckless analysis in which I tried my own interpretive hand at Alex Portnoy’s complaint, his struggle between raffish appetites and ethical impulses, and maybe Roth’s as well. Recall that *Portnoy’s Complaint* is a long analytic confession to one Doctor Spielvogel, who is silent until the end, when he announces his presence with the punchline, “So. Now vee may perhaps to begin. Yes?” My own Spielvogel imitation had to be scaled back: it was fine as a *jeu d’esprit*, but for publication? For the world to see? For literary history? For *Partisan Review*, that Parnassus of my own household gods: Dwight Macdonald, Harold Rosenberg, Mary McCarthy, Saul Bellow, Philip Rahv and William Phillips, Isaac Rosenfeld, Meyer Schapiro? I chickened out and dropped those pages in the wastebasket. In tone it was brash and insouciant, somewhere between diagnosis and shtick, between putting Alexander Portnoy on the couch and putting him on stage, though of course Roth had already beaten me to the punch with both. So, for that matter, had *Partisan Review*, which had published one of the brashest sections of *Portnoy* in 1967: “Whacking Off.” But I wasn’t Roth and knew that I hadn’t the verbal chops or the casehardened nerves to pull it off, and so I put that routine on a short leash, discarding some of the more reckless and jocular speculations.

Here is one I remember. I was running the Freudian chord progression, from oral to anal to phallic, and had this brilliant—to me—analogical epiphany. Recall that Mr. Portnoy suffers from a nervous bowel and spends countless hours on the toilet trying to expel as feces some fraction of what he imbibed as food. His bowels, he jokes, are turning into concrete. But Sophie Portnoy, that humming assembly line of symptoms herself, while reminiscing about a man who once paid her court, a businessman in the condiment line, recalls him as “the biggest manufacturer of mustard in New York. . . . And I could have married him instead of your father.” Hello! Now, it may be precisely because the contents of the Freudian unconscious are few, simple, and boring that it took me about a nanosecond to see that someone’s unconscious—Sophie Portnoy’s, Alex’s, Roth’s?—had dreamed up a rival for the mother’s affections whose bowels not only functioned 24/7 but had brought him riches as well. But if it had been too good to pass up the first time around, it was too wild to pass around the second, and out it

came. There are those who spend their later years regretting their youthful indiscretions—repentant Marxists in particular are ever beating their breasts about the credulities of their youths. A silent majority, however, regrets their youthful discretions, and I am one of them. Forget the Oedipus Complex. Had Freud given us the Prufrock Complex instead, I'm sure I'd still be quoting him today.

Then again, without regret, would we have any literature? Would there be anything to write about? By the time my denatured essay on Roth appeared in *Partisan Review* in 1974, there were intellectual dramas about psychoanalysis being played out all around. Crews had done an about-face on the subject, now proclaiming it to be a pseudoscience whose authority was rooted in Sigmund Freud's flawed character—the character of an intellectual conquistador—rather than in anything empirically derived and testable. That caused no little bit of consternation among his students, many of whom had founded careers on psychoanalysis, either as academics or, in some cases, as psychotherapists, and felt betrayed. I don't count myself as one of them, and while I maintain to this day a handful of Freudian skeletons in my closet, I don't feel any abiding nostalgia for a system of thought that is so clearly a patchwork of cultural prejudice, guesswork, daring, and blunder, and has so little to do with science. It was on Nob Hill, after all, over drinks, that I was given my mantra of few, simple, and boring, and how hard was it really to go the final yard and detach from a fiction that, like Marxism, makes the world seem so much simpler, meaner, and less fascinating than daily experience tells us it is?

We know too, because Roth wrote about it in *My Life as a Man* in 1974, that he also was undergoing a crisis of faith over his own analysis and analyst—the actual Spielvogel in Roth's life. It comes out in that novel, whose “My True Story” section is close enough to Roth's life to be read as a memoir, that “Spielvogel” had published a case history in a professional journal of his famous patient, the very fact of which struck Roth as a violation of trust and a potential exposure of himself as a patient. In the novel, the Roth stand-in, Peter Tarnopol, is driven to break relations with his analyst, who is accused not only with betrayal of his patient, but with filling his head with ready-to-wear visions of his own life: with, as he puts it, substituting for the character's actual, blessed childhood, “rather Dickensian recollections of my mother as an

overwhelming and frightening person.” We are expected to read in Tarnopol's break with his therapist Roth's own disaffection from the Freudian world-view itself. Certainly after the minor debacle of *The Breast* in 1972, in which Freud-in-Spielvogel presides over a Kafkaesque farce about a man turned into a giant female breast, Roth clearly was going to have less to say about “the mother.”

These simultaneous disaffections, by Crews and by Roth, were very intense for me at the time, in part because I had gotten involved in a situation at my home university that had its own momentum of decay, and in part also because Crews took the opportunity in 1972 to dramatize his disgruntlement in a review of Roth's *The Breast* in *The New York Review of Books* that was so damning, that, when added to screeds by Podhoretz and Howe (and Marie Syrkin and Bruno Bettelheim) only confirmed Roth's special preeminence in the rogue's gallery of literature. Sure Roth had his defenders: so had Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. But that handful of us out on the picket lines with our “Free Philip” buttons and our “Unfair” placards on high might just as well have put them down and gone home for dinner. The verdict was in.<sup>2</sup>

In a few brisk and slashing phrases, Crews roughed up Roth as surely as the others had, not by professing revulsion at his sexual hedonism or at crimes against the Jews but by finding in *The Breast* a failure of literary nerve, a backsliding into sobriety at just that moment in his career when he should have been pushing the envelope of his forte: “the portrayal of compulsives whose humane intelligence cannot save them from their irrationality. The sharpness and energy of his work have to do with a fidelity to petty idiocies of self-betrayal.” Roth instead had swallowed the sour bait of orthodox therapeutic wisdom and made his suffering mastomorphic hero into a “noble survivor.” “Roth loses control over the half-developed themes that would have saved his story from banality. It is as if Kafka were to bludgeon us into admitting that Gregor Samsa is the most stoical beetle we have met, and a wonderful sport about the whole thing.” And what, asks Crews, “would Alex Portnoy have to say about *that*?”

Why had I neglected Crews's review of *The Breast* while working up a brief on Roth's behalf? Because, painful as it would have been for me to say then, I shared Crews's disappointment, though not for his reasons: the hero's, and presumably Roth's, stoical recipe for enduring

catastrophe, Freud's own "put up with it." (British psychoanalyst Adam Phillips refers to classical psychoanalysis as the "noble killjoy" and there it was.) The book struck me as flat in ways that were not so easy to pin down: the élan, the propulsion, the sheer performative excess of Roth at the top of his game, were missing. The problem for me was not where Crews had found it, in the hero's, David Alan Kepesh's, sententiousness, his mammary rendition of Polonius, but in the book's dark, wordless core. The book was depressive, as if produced by a collapse of spirits, for which Kepesh's grotesque transformation was only a metaphor and learning to put up was the only available choice. Roth's next book, *My Life as a Man*, would tell us what that was.



My own connection to the Freudian enterprise was also under strain. I had taken a teaching job at SUNY Buffalo, which at the time was a watering hole for psychoanalytic theorists through its Center for the Psychological Study of the Arts, presided over by Norman Holland. When I arrived, the center was a raucous ongoing symposium: a place where the Sturm und Drang of the psychoanalytic movement at the end of the last century was particularly stormy. Its monthly dinner meetings were occasions for airing the crises of faith that psychoanalysis was experiencing and for staging previews of the Next Big Thing, whatever it might be. Everybody conceded that the future of psychoanalysis was up for grabs, and like bookies in some Caesar's Palace of ideas, my colleagues were out there handicapping the contenders. In that hothouse atmosphere I was brought nose-to-nose with bold and free-wheeling speculation from all over the map: from the French Freudians (Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan) to the British Kleinians and Object Theorists (Melanie Klein, D. W. Winnicott, R. D. Laing), to American therapeutic radicals from Wilhelm Reich to Norman O. Brown. The meetings were attended by feminists brandishing their copies of Juliet Mitchell; a cigar-smoking composition theorist who fulminated about "reader response" and "discourse communities"; an acolyte of Jacques Lacan who giddily regaled us with stories of how the master stiffed him on his training analysis; a neo-Jungian disciple of James Hillman who touted a polytheistic psychology that hearkened back to Greek theology; a law professor and pornography buff who usually showed up

stoned and sprinkled his tedious filibusters with quotes from the Beatles; and a local psychoanalyst who had cooked up his own post-Freudian system called "identity theory," whereby personality could be boiled down to its dominant and repetitive themes. I had fallen into an academic *Walpurgisnacht*, in which I felt like Leopold Bloom wandering through a hallucinatory night-town of theories. Although it left me bedazzled, I did value the free-wheeling spirit of a forum in which the debates were heated and most questions were open for discussion, except the crucial one: how can we know if any of this is true?

Then, one day, by some hand signal that I happened not to see — like a batter who has missed the bunt sign — it was over, and the winner was declared: identity theory. As if nothing momentous had taken place, suddenly my colleagues were busily coining these one-liners, summing up human essences in aphorisms so compact that you could stick them into fortune cookies and still have space left over for lucky numbers. From the delirious multiplicity of jostling isms, few, simple, and boring were back in the driver's seat. This collapse of the marketplace of ideas into a sectarian sweatshop was my cue to slip quietly out the door and turn my attention to a body of writing that I had been working up since *Portnoy's Complaint* and which extended outward into unknown and fascinating territory: Jewish writers and New York intellectual life. There was my cornucopia of ideas: Russia, Stalin, Trotsky, homeless intellectuals, homages to Catalonia, modernism, the fall of Paris and the rise of abstract expressionism, *Partisan Review*, the death rattle (it then seemed) of Marxism, the Chicago Dostoevskians, the tragic sense of life, the fiction produced by the decay of a radical movement, the literature of the fortunate fall.

It is a truism that changes in basic orientation, in paradigm, as they say, are always experienced as liberations, and it was true that the encounter with psychoanalysis felt to many of us at first like a breakthrough into new and exciting vistas and a permission to speak candidly of intimate matters that had formerly been taboo. To have the unconscious life at one's beck and call made life seem more intricate, more mysterious, more unstable and explosive. It lent depth to ordinary life, drama to any human activity more complicated than a yawn, and rational purpose to eccentric behavior. For the literary critic, moreover, it provided a backstage pass to the artist's unconscious, allowing the critic

to trump the writer at his/her own game: an understanding of the heart's true desires. "You call that passion? Why, that's textbook regression." Ten years later, after those mysteries had been packaged as doctrines and the taboos had become brand names—when, for example, the male sexual organ got shipped over from France and marketed as a philosophical nullity called *The Phallus*—I needed liberation from the liberation. For the next leg of the journey, Philip Roth turned out to be a point of departure: his writing, the energies it engaged in me and others, blustery and provocative though they sometimes were, were embarkation points into the turbulent and unpredictable world I was looking for. Did I want strangeness? Well, there it was. The treacherous? Stick around. Sex? Well, Newark had it too, and as for comedy, it had Vienna beat hands down. The tragic sense of life? Prague. So much of what I've read, thought, and explored for the past thirty years started out with Roth. His books have served me as windows on the one hand and a home base on the other: a certain renegade sensibility that answers to my own need for a familiar, reliable, and above all intelligent rebelliousness. Maybe it is the Newark thing, calling me home like a salmon that lasers in on its own tiny stream a thousand miles out at sea. I'd be the last one to deny that there might be something irreducibly parochial in my interests. Maybe too it is the engaged intelligence in everything Roth puts his hand to, or the grievance and restlessness that keeps his writing fresh, even when, as some of his critics continue to complain, it is a theater of personality or of libido. They are hard to distinguish at times. If a man wants to shill for his own cock, why get in his way? Let's leave it this way: I found in Roth something I needed to stay interested for these thirty years: the opposite of few, simple, and boring and the antidote to the terror of growing stale, routine, and predictable with age. Roth hasn't, an example I would hope to follow.



Virtually nothing that follows was written initially with this collection in mind. Most of the chapters were written first as book reviews. As a result, there is a degree of overlap and repetition in the book that I have decided not to edit out. Why cripple an essay because its best lines have appeared elsewhere? And why bury your best lines by delivering them just once? The reader should be aware, however, that my saying something

two or three times is not intended to browbeat. In Yiddish it is called "hocking a chinik," literally, chopping a teakettle. It means only that I've run out of fresh things to say about a particular book and am in desperate need of a phrase. I've updated much of this writing when I could, appended second thoughts to other essays and reviews. Sometimes the original had to say far less than needed to be said, and sometimes I have had a change of heart and mind. Some initial enthusiasms have faded; some initial disappointments have been rethought. And I've had time to read other commentators and reflect on them. In the passing of time, critical commentary on Roth has grown richer and more varied, as some of the best minds of Roth's generation have tried their hand at coming to grips with his books.



# 1

## The Facts and *The Facts*

This book will have little to say about Philip Roth's life. Biography may or may not be a way into fiction; it all depends on how you read and what you want from fiction, and I've decided that the reader of this book will have to do with the bare minimum of biography and slake his or her curiosity about Roth elsewhere. I have neither the skill nor the patience for that sort of work, and this book will be as biographically thin as I can reasonably make it without pretending that the author doesn't exist altogether. (The pomo theorists who deny the author's existence have dealt themselves a comfy hand. Lucky them. They can press ahead undeterred by life and its complications.) I won't even claim it as a matter of principle that this book will be thin on Roth's life, only that to make it thicker would be to write a very different book than the one I have in mind. Hopefully, soon, someone will write that book; Roth deserves and will eventually get his Boswell. Without being too principled about it, I'm more interested in the reader's experience of Roth's books: that is, my own. And I know from long self-acquaintance that this experience is haphazard, inconsistent, and whimsical. I mean, if you are going to be consistent or rule bound about the business of reading, why do it? Where's the adventure?

However, having issued this disclaimer, I do after all have to say something about the author of the novels and stories of which I am trying to make sense, if only to ward off total disorientation on the reader's part and sometimes on my own. And, moreover, to acknowledge the obvious, that Roth has strip-mined his own life for the stony ore of his books, and a little knowledge in his case goes a long way. For those who

don't already know something about Roth and are picking this book up out of sheer random curiosity—of course, no such reader exists—the question of who this Roth guy is should at least be answered well enough to encourage them to read ahead, and I feel obliged to say something about where readers might go for more. Roth's own "autobiography" of 1988, *The Facts*, is the obvious place to start, and if I highlight the word autobiography with quotation marks, it is only because the book is surprisingly brief for someone who, at the time it was written, was fifty-five years old, and also because Roth himself, by the time the book was finished, called the entire story into question and begged us not to mistake *The Facts* for the facts.

I find it uncanny, but hardly beyond imagining, that for several years now I had set *The Facts* aside for future reading, only to find, upon opening it recently, that it was already graffitied, from first page to last, by my asterisks and exclamation points of approval and my groans of "get off it" and "not again" and "shit." Am I that out of it that I would not remember a book I had read just fourteen years ago, and one that is both by and about an author whose work I hold dear? Of course, I do forget things; fourteen years ago is not last week, and I had read the book apart from any writing assignment. I'm more likely to forget a book that I had not written about than one that was branded into memory by the necessity of dredging up words about it. Or, was the book just forgettable? I hardly blame myself when a book I reviewed as recently as a year ago has slipped so completely out of memory that I have to look up my review to remember even the first thing about it, including the author's name. In such cases I don't think I'm losing it, just clearing my mind to make room for more urgent or pleasurable things. I doubt that any profound self-analysis is called for here; it is not as though I had forgotten my own past, and it is true that after a rereading I find *The Facts* one of Roth's less mesmerizing books, at least until that last thirty-four pages, which take the form of a letter from Nathan Zuckerman to Philip Roth advising him not to publish the manuscript, because, "You try to pass off here as frankness what looks to me like the dance of the seven veils—what's on the page is like a code for something missing."

Zuckerman then proceeds to chip away at everything Roth had tried to construct, from the aureate memories of a cosseted childhood in

Newark to the vivid early days of literary success to the brutal encounters with reader disapproval and the horrors of marriage in 1959 to Margaret Martinson Williams (he calls her Josie Jensen in *The Facts*), a marriage that was combat from first to last, and was not completely resolved until her death in a car crash in 1968, though they were legally separated in 1963. At that point, *The Facts* drops the pose of “undisguised” narrative (as Roth announces it to be at the start) and takes on the dialectical point-counterpoint of a Roth novel itself, with Nathan Zuckerman playing the role of devil’s advocate and something more: psychotherapist digging out of the book’s bland narrative the grievances and terrors and culpabilities—the sly motives, the slick defenses, the punishing self-delusions—that the main text leaves unspoken. As Zuckerman observes, “With autobiography there’s always another text, a countertext if you will, to the one presented. It’s probably the most manipulative of all literary forms.” A contemporary literary critic, armed with the jargons of the profession, might say that with this appendix, Nathan Zuckerman “deconstructs” Philip Roth’s story, or that, since Zuckerman after all is only Roth’s hand puppet, that Roth does that himself. Besides not caring for that jargon, which lumps together almost any degree of dissent from a neighborly demurral to a *New Criterion* disemboweling into a single all-purpose verb of demolition, I don’t think that gets us any closer to Roth’s own intention than the simple observation that he produces his hand puppet and gives him his withering lines in order to rescue his life’s story from an error built into its initial conception: that he could write about himself in a voice of calculated blandness and bemused nostalgia without producing a forced march of recollected events, a talking résumé, unilluminated by imagination, uninigorated by regret, unanimated by guilt. Roth?



Roth began writing *The Facts*, he tells us, in the spring of 1987, after a mental crackup induced by drug use in the wake of what should have been simple knee surgery. To deal with postsurgical pain, Roth’s doctor prescribed the drug Halcion, which was already known to induce psychosis, a fact of which Roth was unaware. Roth’s account of the experience in *The Facts* is sketchy and no more than a bridge to the exercise in recalling his past in order to reconstruct his present. “In

order to recover what I had lost I had to go back to the moment of origin,” he writes in *The Facts*. “Here, so as to fall back into my former life, to retrieve my vitality, to transform myself in myself, I began rendering experience untransformed.” A far more harrowing account of the dread, the panic, the sense of utter mental chaos may be found in the early pages of the novel *Operation Shylock*, in which Roth details those months when his mind had slipped its moorings and come utterly apart. A readership far larger than the one that read *Operation Shylock* would have seen that story as part of Roth’s account of an interview with Israeli author Aharon Appelfeld in the *New York Times Book Review* in February 1988.<sup>1</sup> They would have learned of the origins of the unusually sober *The Facts* in these terms: “My only chance of getting through to daylight without having my mind come completely apart was to hook hold of a talismanic image out of my most innocent past and try to ride out the menace of the long night lashed to the mast of that recollection.”

It is self-evident to anyone who has read more than one or two of Roth’s novels that his own experience has been the basis for much of his storytelling. He has come into more than just a little bit of criticism for that from book reviewers and readers, and readers who have little stomach for a writer who puts himself on display, or at least appears to do so, are not going to take full pleasure in his work, no matter what else he does. In *The Facts* itself, in the form of a letter to his reader and literary creation, Nathan Zuckerman, Roth writes: “In the past, as you know, the facts have always been notebook jottings, my way of springing into fiction. For me, as for most novelists, every genuine imaginative event begins down there, with the fact, with the specific, and not with the philosophical, the ideological, or the abstract.” And by facts Roth has usually meant experiences. “On the pendulum of self-exposure that oscillates between aggressively exhibitionistic Mailerism and sequestered Salingerism, I’d say that I occupy a midway position, trying in the public arena to resist gratuitously prying or preening without making too holy a fetish of secrecy and seclusion.”

The situation is a lot more complicated. Roth is not a public figure, and if not so tightly secluded from the public as Salinger or Thomas Pynchon, he keeps his distance from public life. And yet, as he does that, he makes certain his books will be provocative enough to arouse