

Turning Up the Flame

Philip Roth's Later Novels

Edited by

Jay L. Halio and Ben Siegel



Newark: University of Delaware Press

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DELAWARE

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Associated University Presses
2010 Eastpark Boulevard
Cranbury, NJ 08512

The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials Z39.48-1984.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Turning up the flame : Philip Roth's later novels / edited by Jay L. Halio and Ben Siegel.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-87413-902-3 (alk. paper)

1. Roth, Philip—Criticism and interpretation. I. Halio, Jay L.

II. Siegel, Ben, 1925—

PS3568.O855Z94 2005

813'.54—dc22

2004021038

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Preface

PHILIP ROTH IS THAT LITERARY RARITY—AN AMERICAN NOVELIST WHO gets better with age. In recent years he has astounded critics with both the quality and the quantity of his literary output. Roth has been publishing fiction for over four decades. He has never been satisfied merely to repeat himself, to keep mining the same themes and material. Some critics did feel that he was doing just that in his Zuckerman novels. Apparently stung by such criticism, Roth set out to explore new territory, to make each new novel an experimental, challenging, even outrageous effort. He has succeeded beyond all critical expectations—in terms of quantity, quality, and dramatic effect. The time would appear ripe then to take a closer look at Roth's more recent or "later" fiction—that is, his writings of the last two decades or so. That is the intent of this modest gathering of critical essays. We are unaware of any other essay collection devoted primarily to Roth's fiction of the last two decades. To gather these essays, we organized panels at meetings of the American Literature Association and the Modern Language Association, and otherwise requested, pleaded, and cajoled some of the leading Roth specialists to contribute essays to this volume. We are proud of what we are here able to offer to those readers who have an interest in the fiction of one of America's premier active novelists.

Co-editor Ben Siegel starts us off with a discussion of Roth's primary attitudes and approaches to writing fiction. In "Reading Philip Roth: Facts and Fancy, Fiction and Autobiography," he offers a brief overview of Roth's interplay of the real and the nonreal, especially his mix of the personal or autobiographical and the fictional or imaginative. Siegel discusses some of the parallels between Roth's writing and that of Saul Bellow and E. L. Doctorow, who use some of the same techniques. All three tease their readers with protagonists who often strongly resemble themselves in terms of age and circumstance, time and place. But when questioned by interviewers about the similarities, each novelist will insist that, while he may have borrowed certain details from his own life, he should not be con-

fused with his hero or his hero with him. What these writers are doing, Siegel suggests, "is underscoring the interplay between fact and fiction, history and literature, the real and imaginative, and often between the present and past. And because they are Jewish, they frequently will draw from the general Jewish experience in America." In recent years this has meant that they "have turned increasingly to Israel's triumphs and tensions and to what is undoubtedly for Jews the most traumatic experience of the twentieth century, if not of all time: the Holocaust."

We are fully aware, of course, that Roth's earlier novels cannot be totally ignored, and our contributors have seen to it that they are not. Comparisons with what Roth did earlier in his career and what he is doing now are very relevant. Most of our essayists, therefore, refer usefully to the earlier fiction, showing how the later novels compare or contrast with them, or at times build on them. For example, Debra Shostak does just that in her "Philip Roth's Fictions of Self-Exposure." A salient feature of Roth's recent writing, as already mentioned, is his ongoing need to experiment. He appears to approach each new book as a challenge not merely to explore but also to extend the boundaries of fiction by finding new and different ways of depicting modern human relationships by means of biography and autobiography, contemporary history and politics, humor and dialogue, and varied other narrative modes.

One major theme that runs through Roth's fiction and takes many forms is the nature of the self and the problems of self-worth or self-identity. This theme is by no means unique to modern fiction, much less to Roth's later works. Certainly Neil Klugman in *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959) and Gabe Wallach in *Letting Go* (1962) were not the first modern young men to set out in quest of self-discovery. But at those early points and increasingly in his later fiction, Roth gives the theme some interesting twists as he introduces elements of his own life into his novels. In *Zuckerman Unbound* (1985), he presents the novelist Nathan Zuckerman, whom he had introduced in *My Life as a Man* (1974) and in *The Ghost Writer* (1984), as a kind of facsimile of himself. Zuckerman is the author of a notorious novel called *Carnovsky* that seems very much in substance and reputation like Roth's own *Portnoy's Complaint*. But as Debra Shostak argues, Roth is here playing with autobiography, making the most of anticipated reader inclinations to interpret factually what is presented fictionally. Roth's tendency to mingle fiction and fact reaches its culmination in *Deception* (1990) and *Operation Shylock* (1993), wherein a character

named "Philip" and another called "Philip Roth" appear as the chief protagonists. The "peculiar tensions" in these novels, as Shostak refers to them, are among the most intriguing in contemporary fiction. Indeed, her analysis of the later fiction is both trenchant and illuminating.

In her "Autobiography: False Confession?" Margaret Smith focuses also on Roth's ways of introducing autobiography or certain "facts" into his fiction and transforming them imaginatively into narrative. She argues "that Roth does not write autobiography as such and that his fiction is not a mere rendition of facts colored by his imagination. On the contrary, Roth contrives to blur the boundaries of both fiction and autobiography as a narrative strategy." Consequently, she rejects the supposition of those critics and readers who view Nathan Zuckerman (or any of Roth's other protagonists) "as Roth's hidden, or second, self." Instead, Smith accepts Roth's claim that Zuckerman is merely a narrative construct whose task is merely "to show the power harnessed by fiction to 'illuminate life.'" Roth explains, and Smith agrees, that "Zuckerman is an act," an example of "the art of impersonation," one that "prohibits narrator-figures such as Zuckerman and his fellow protagonists from relaying any aspect of 'truth' due to their singular fictional capacity within the text."

The international appeal of Roth's fiction is underscored here by the appearance of a noted Indian specialist in American literature. G. Neelakantan pursues further this topic of self-exposure and the interplay of autobiography and fiction in his "Textualizing the Self: Adultery, Blatant Fictions, and Jewishness in Philip Roth's *Deception*." Not only is this novel significant for the first appearance of "Philip" as a character in his own right, but also for its unusual narrative style. Written mostly in dialogue, unlike any of his previous novels, it shows Roth's continuing interest in experimentation and contains the famous indictment by "Philip" of critics who repeatedly misinterpret his work. "I write fiction and I'm told it's autobiography, I write autobiography and I'm told it's fiction, so if I'm so dim and they're so smart, let *them* decide what it is or it isn't." But of course that is precisely the confusion Roth has worked so diligently to create.

Alexis Kate Wilson, like our other authors, is interested in Roth's treatment of the complex questions of Jewish identity. In "The Travels of the American *Talush*," she centers on Roth's use of the modernist trope of the artist, in the person of a Jew who stands outside

his culture to function as an observer or commentator. She is intrigued by the ways Roth both echoes and alters this modernist trope so that "the modernist themes of marginality and alterity" inevitably surface for him, even in Israel. For even in that Jewish homeland, Roth's American Jews find themselves "insiders and outsiders at the same time." Roth explores this Jewish American relationship with Israel most notably in *The Counterlife*. Here he devotes five chapters to "overlapping and contradicting stories about Nathan Zuckerman and his brother, Henry." Writing in this postmodern spirit, Wilson states, Roth has in essence "created an antinovel."

In "Texts, Lives, and Bellybuttons: Philip Roth's *Operation Shylock* and the Renegotiation of Subjectivity," Derek Parker Royal continues the discussion of self-awareness and self-identity. He does so with an in-depth examination of subjectivity, specifically ethnic subjectivity. "Ever since *My Life as a Man*," notes Royal, Roth "has engaged in a relentless negotiation between life and art, a metafictional no-man's land where narrative is an uncertain combination of creator and creation." As does Shostak, Royal rejects the contention of some critics that the "autobiographical" novels are merely narcissistic, and he argues instead that Roth is engaged in a more philosophical investigation of reality, truth, and identity. Like Kafka, a writer he much admires, Roth deliberately ponders the written world and the unwritten world, the world of fiction and the world of fact—or what we think of as fact.

Roth presents this issue most pointedly in *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography* (1988). He wrote this personal account when he was emerging from a Halcion-induced depression and needed to find his way back to fiction—a situation both Shostak and Royal treat in their essays. Even here, Roth involves his primary alter ego, Nathan Zuckerman, by starting his little book with a letter to him asking for his opinion of this venture into life writing. He ends his memoir with Zuckerman's reply—a long argument summed up in two words: "Don't publish." Zuckerman insists that Roth is an impersonator, not an autobiographer; that he needs Zuckerman as much as Zuckerman needs him. Roth appears to agree. He admits that *The Facts* begs more questions than it answers, and that "Memories of the past are not memories of facts but memories of your imaginings of the facts." English critic Frank Kermode also seems to agree. In his memoir *Not Entitled* (1995), Kermode, too, speaks perceptively of the inevitable mixture of fact and fiction, or what he calls fantasy, when one tries to write autobiography and also write well at the same time.

These comments on the inevitable mingling of fact and fiction would seem then to characterize most autobiography—including, ironically enough, Claire Bloom's *Leaving a Doll's House* (1996), her no-holds-barred attack on Roth, their marriage, and their life together. Roth wrote *The Facts* well before Bloom's book appeared and well before she and Roth were married and divorced, though they had been living together for many years. Royal calls her account a countercontext to Roth's own, notwithstanding that *The Facts* does not extend into Roth's life as far as his liaison with Bloom. Whether *I Married a Communist* (1998) is a countercontext to that countercontext, Royal does not say, nor does Shostak. Instead, Shostak and Royal concentrate on *Operation Shylock*, subtitled *A Confession*, which is not a confession in the usual sense of the term, though it is intended to read like one.

But in "Death, Mourning, and Besse's Ghost: From Philip Roth's *The Facts* to *Sabbath's Theater*," James Mellard returns our attention to Roth's memoir writing proper and that mode's implications for his later fiction. He shows how *The Facts* and *Patrimony*, Roth's account of his father's last years and death, are closely related. Mellard points up a happening easily overlooked in *Patrimony* and certainly not immediately apparent in *The Facts*. He notes that Besse Roth's death in 1981 underlay much of what Philip wrote in both books and also motivated *The Facts* "subterraneanly." These two autobiographical works, then, are thus connected by the deaths of his parents—unconsciously in the first, overtly in the second.

Mellard's Lacanian analysis of these two books is marked by other useful and penetrating insights. The same can be said of his discussion of Roth's symbolic dream of Herman Roth as a silent, disabled warship drifting toward the shore, or of the 1937 photograph of Roth, his father, and his brother appearing on the dust jacket and as the frontispiece of *Patrimony*. Skipping over the intervening fiction, Mellard then goes directly to *Sabbath's Theater*, which he also associates with Roth's biographical work. He views this novel as the legacy of the mother, and describes it as "a history of unresolved mourning that drives Mickey Sabbath away from the family and into a lifelong search for satisfaction of desire that comes with a successful resolution of the Oedipus complex." Is Mickey Sabbath yet another Roth surrogate? Mellard does not say so, nor does he hint at any such suggestion (but see Shostak on her representation of the "transgressive features of the 'Roth' persona"). Mellard also does not mention the novel's epigraph, but it, too, connects this book with the other two.

It comes from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: "Every third thought shall be my grave." In fact, so drenched in death is *Sabbath's Theater* that some readers were moved to wonder about the state of Roth's physical and mental health. His three subsequent and very different novels provided a ready answer.

Andrew Gordon shifts our attention from Roth's obsession with death to his fascination with the pastoral. In his "The Critique of Utopia in Philip Roth's *The Counterlife* and *American Pastoral*," Gordon argues that, in these two novels, Roth is "deconstructing some contemporary versions of the pastoral." Roth's satiric, subversive bent moves him to reject "utopian longings" and to validate "perpetual struggle, complexity, and uncertainty in both life and art." This is especially true in *The Counterlife*. For in *American Pastoral*, "despite his demolition of the American dream," Roth still clings to "certain pastoral ideals"—that is, he contrasts "the wonderful lost America of his Newark childhood in the 1940s to the fallen America of the 1960s and 1970s." As does Nathan Zuckerman, Roth has to keep fighting his own attraction to "pastoral illusions." Part of his struggle is directed at "the persistent appeal of pastoral fantasies of innocence; defeat one and another emerges in its place." In *The Counterlife*, Roth sees all individuals "as fiction makers." Thus he "forces us to reconsider the nature of the utopias we all script, the counterlives we would prefer to live." Each novel section "constitutes a critique of a utopia which is constructed only to be deconstructed." These utopias include "the myths of romantic love, of Zionism, and of 'Christendom.' He rejects all these as fantasies of innocence, retreats to the womb." The single utopia "Roth will allow is that of fiction making itself: the power of the human mind endlessly to imagine and to re-imagine our lives."

The next four essays also treat *American Pastoral* from various perspectives. For Bonnie Lyons, the novel is an American tragedy. In her "Philip Roth's American Tragedies," she argues that *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, and *The Human Stain* "establish Roth 'as our most important author of significant American tragedies.'" She is "not using the word 'tragedy' to indicate a type of drama," she explains, "but to assert that these are novels which share a deeply tragic vision or tragic version of reality." All three novels "depict heroes whose fates are intricately enmeshed in their specifically American settings and times." Thus they are for her truly "American tragedies" that depict "man at the limits of his sovereignty." In addition, all three center "on the hero's will to 'fight against his destiny

... and state his case before God or his fellows.' Each embodies then the crux of the tragic vision."

In "Newark Maid Feminism in Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*," Marshall Bruce Gentry focuses on feminist aspects of the novel, an approach that may surprise readers who have hitherto, rightly or wrongly, regarded Roth as a misogynist. Alluding to M. M. Bakhtin's theory of how, on occasion, characters win battles with their authors, Gentry argues that Roth experiments with ways that give women "room to show him up." If he sometimes tries too hard to do this, as in *Deception*, Roth succeeds better in *American Pastoral* where, according to Gentry, the women "seem to win a battle over the dominant male voices of its main character, Swede Levov, the narrator Nathan Zuckerman, and even, to some extent, Philip Roth himself." Gentry makes a strong case for his point of view, but he is acutely aware that not all readers will agree with him. Indeed, he cites a number of reviewers who do not. Gentry reveals how Roth leads the reader early on to believe that he sides with Zuckerman, who is both the narrator and in a way the "inventor" of the story, as well as with Swede, the principal character. But then, as the female characters start responding to Swede, the reader notices how much more aware Roth is than Zuckerman of the limits of Swede's world. Most reviewers have seen the novel as chiefly a critique of the 1960s culture of permissiveness. However, Gentry adds a new dimension to that perception. He argues that Swede and all he represents are at least indirectly responsible for the nightmarish experiences that followed. And this point, Gentry insists, is made mainly through the women in the novel.

Timothy Parrish, in focusing on "the end of identity" in *American Pastoral*, develops further the theme that the earlier contributors have emphasized. He begins by maintaining that Roth's definition of the self, which Parrish calls "postmodern," makes it hard to see how his books endorse a particular point of view, "Jewish" or any other. On the other hand, as in *Patrimony*, where Roth buries his father in the traditional burial shroud, and *Operation Shylock*, in which Roth confronts his double in Israel, his books of the 1990s seem to point to the author accepting his identity as a "Jewish writer." This is especially true in *American Pastoral*, which Parrish views as a kind of tribal narrative. For Zuckerman identifies with Swede Levov as a member of our "tribe," and the narrative becomes an "elegy" for the sort of Jewish identity that Roth's earlier novels tended to undermine.

Another element that has always fascinated Roth's readers is his use of the erotic. In "Eros and Death in Roth's Later Fiction," co-editor Jay Halio offers a brief but fresh look at Roth's recent linking of the erotic and death, most notably in *Sabbath's Theater* and *The Dying Animal*. "Whether these preoccupations result from Roth's own advancing age and past serious illnesses," notes Halio, "I cannot say, though it would hardly surprise me if that were true. We have learned, however, not to make too close a connection between fiction and autobiography. Roth has always been emphatic on that point."

In the same vein, Ellen Gerstle meets ~~head-on~~ the oft-repeated charges of obscenity, misogyny, and sexual perversion leveled at Roth through the years. In "*The Dying Animal*: The Art of Obsessing or Obsessing about Art?" she points out that this novel "does call up questions about obscenity and art, subjects that often have drawn him into conflict with his readers." Such complaints, she states, have a "disturbingly familiar ring, echoing earlier rebukes of misogyny and sexual perversion." Other critics claim Roth here is "overworking past themes." Gerstle concedes that Roth "was looking at an old theme: the nature of obsession." But she feels "he was doing so in a way that created a rich subtext to the obvious plot line of a May-December love affair." In addition, the "novel is as much about dying," she states, as it is about sexual desire, individual freedom, and artistic expression. These are all "signature Rothian themes," she concludes, so that it is difficult to be certain "whether *The Dying Animal* represents Roth's discourse on the art of obsessing or Roth obsessing about art."

It is clear, then, that we have assembled here a group of strong-minded critics with ~~fresh and distinctive~~ ways of reading Roth's later novels. Of course, each reader will add his or her own interpretations to the mix.

Jay Halio
Ben Siegel

NOTE: The essays by Debra Shostak, G. Neelakantan, Derek Parker Royal, James Mellard, Marshall Bruce Gentry, and Timothy L. Parrish originally appeared in *Shofar* 19 (Fall 2000), and are reprinted here with permission. Philip Roth's novel, *The Plot Against America* (2004), a satirical political fantasy involving the Roth family, appeared after this volume was in production.

Turning Up the Flame

1

Introduction: Reading Philip Roth: Facts and Fancy, Fiction and Autobiography— A Brief Overview

Ben Siegel

SERIOUS STUDENTS OF LITERATURE ARE KEENLY AWARE THAT ALL WRITING that passes for fiction contains a good deal of history. They also know that novelists and short-story writers draw upon both past and present authors and events. Writers read the newspapers and news magazines and watch television and internet news reports, in search of ideas and characters they can filter through their creative imaginations and present anew in their own long and short narratives. Perhaps most importantly, they draw upon their own lives and the lives of family members and friends. We also know that those who write history do some of the same things as they sift through the archives, manuscripts, chronicles, and artifacts of the past. If they are good historians, they, too, filter their findings through their own creative imaginations to produce those writings they and we call "history." Often enough, it is difficult to tell the difference between a compelling work of history and a moving work of fiction. This is especially true of that form of history we call autobiography.

These familiar observations can be described as truisms, but they apply very strongly to much of the fiction being published by contemporary American writers, especially Jewish American fiction writers. Of the latter group, three of the most prominent are Saul Bellow, E. L. Doctorow, and Philip Roth. These three novelists like to tease their readers by presenting protagonists who often strongly resemble themselves in terms of time and place, age and circumstance. In other words, the basic details of their protagonists' lives strongly parallel their own. But when questioned by interviewers about the similarities, each novelist will reply that while he may have borrowed certain details from his own life, he should not be confused with his hero or his hero with him. What these writers are

doing then is underscoring the interplay between fact and fiction, history and literature, the real and imaginative, and often between the present and past. And because they are Jewish, they frequently will draw from the general Jewish experience in America. In earlier years, Jewish writers relied upon the immigrant experience of their grandparents, parents, or their own. The next generation then tended to focus on America's Depression years of the 1930s, and then on the years following World War II—with their Cold War politics, civil rights struggles, and feminist movement. But in recent years America's Jewish writers have turned increasingly to Israel's triumphs and tensions and to what is undoubtedly for Jews the most traumatic experience of the twentieth century, if not of all time: the Holocaust.

For them to do so, however, has not been easy, and it has taken them time. In the immediate postwar years, many American writers felt they had no right to deal with that cataclysmic event, because they were so geographically distant from it. In fact, Saul Bellow has expressed in print his regret at having taken so long to confront the Holocaust in his fiction. Reviewers had criticized him in the early 1950s when he published *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953)¹ and failed to mention the destruction of Jews in Europe. He now admits that he was too focused on other matters—that is, on his own life and career in America. But in more recent years he has opted to “remember” this Jewish trauma in his fiction.

Only with the passing of time have American novelists grown to feel the Holocaust a suitable subject for their fiction. Bellow's first attempt at dealing with that painful subject was *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970).² Artur Sammler, all Bellow readers will recall, was a survivor of the death camps. He had lost his wife there, as well as his vision in one eye. Bellow returned to the theme of the Holocaust in his short novel, *The Bellarosa Connection* (1989).³ He has several times referred to himself as a chronicler, who is better able to present a clear picture of a time and place than most so-called historians. He feels that most competent novelists can do the same. Bellow is, like Philip Roth, a strongly “autobiographical” fictionist. His monologists, whether or not they speak in the first person, generally share many of his views, traits, and personal experiences. His essays and interviews make this clear. In *The Bellarosa Connection*, Bellow again allows his narrator to speak in the first person. Indeed, to render his storyteller's identity more suggestive, Bellow does not even give him a name. Yet he proves the least dis-

guised of Bellow heroes and, characteristically, resembles strongly several predecessors. But unlike earlier Bellow figures, this narrator has had no political, economic, or cultural wisdom to impart. His field is neither politics nor economics; nor is it history or literature. It is memory. A retired expert in memory training, this elderly entrepreneur is, therefore, a collector of old images, impressions, and ideas. He is not that different then from Artur Sammler, who also was a Zammler or “collector” of memories of an eventful life—or from such great remembrancers as Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, and E. L. Doctorow, among others. This individual has made his fortune merely by teaching his clients tricks of memory. Indeed, critics have made much of the parallels between *The Bellarosa Connection* and *Mr. Sammler's Planet*.

It is worth noting that the controlling metaphor of the earlier novel is vision or seeing—as it is so often in Bellow's fiction. However, in *The Bellarosa Connection*, Bellow has shifted his central metaphor from seeing to remembering and his narrative perspective from that of a European Jewish survivor to that of two American Jews: the famous impresario Billy Rose and the memory-expert narrator. Both feel removed from the Holocaust by being native-born Americans. Neither wishes to give much thought to the trauma of their fellow Jews. Indeed, the unnamed narrator again strongly resembles the young Saul Bellow, who also did not want to think of the painful events in Europe, much less write about them. He also parallels, if in different ways, such earlier Bellow figures as Moses Herzog, Charlie Citrine, Willis Mosby, Ijah Brodsky, and Samuel Braun. They are all, when last seen, busy reflecting on their past relationships with families and friends and on their own moral characters as they prepare for the Great Inevitable that is death. Saul Bellow appears to be doing the same. Much of the narrative irony in his fiction, as in American-Jewish fiction generally, stems from repeated reminders that Jews in America quickly developed a selective memory. Many blocked out much of their own ancestral heritage. Such forgetfulness, the Holocaust aside, has never been really true of Bellow; he has spent his entire professional life writing about what he remembers. In fact, to critics who may wonder when he will stop writing, he makes his position clear: “[I]f you have worked in memory, which is life itself,” his narrator explains, “there is no retirement except in death.”⁴

With Bellow, then, we have touched on those elements mentioned at the outset: the interplay of fact and fancy, past and present, his-

tory or autobiography and fiction—as well as the subject that has grown more, rather than less, persistent in recent American-Jewish fiction, the Holocaust—with which Bellow deals rather extensively in his latest novel, *Ravelstein* (2000).⁵ These same elements, if in understandably different forms, are to be found in the fiction of Philip Roth and E. L. Doctorow. The latter is another very talented writer who happens to be Jewish and who also likes to blur the lines between fiction and history, the creative imagination and biography or autobiography. Doctorow's most directly autobiographical novel is *World's Fair* (1985),⁶ which was characterized by one reviewer as “a peculiar hybrid of novel and memoir.”⁷ It is a nostalgic view of life in New York during the Depression, as experienced by a young boy who recounts his first nine years and ends his account with his 1939 visit to the World's Fair in Flushing Meadow. The boy's first name is Edgar (as is Doctorow's), and he grows up in the Bronx in the 1930s. His parents, like those of Doctorow, are named Rose and Dave. His brother's name—like that of the author's brother—is Donald. The family name, however, has been changed. Other details of the family's life are to be found in Doctorow's short story “The Writer in the Family,” which appears as the first tale in Doctorow's story collection *Lives of the Poets: A Novella and Six Stories* (1984).⁸ But the Doctorow novel best known to readers is *Ragtime* (1975),⁹ which has taken on new life as a motion picture and a highly successful stage musical. In it Doctorow returns to the nation-changing time span between the twentieth century's start and World War I. Those years saw the creation of the auto assembly line and the Model T. Ford, moving pictures and ragtime music. They witnessed also the constant arrivals of “rag ships” laden with immigrants. But what is significant here is that to tell his story, Doctorow intermingles a cluster of historical figures of that era with three fictional families. Working from what pop history and biographies relate about such celebrities as J. P. Morgan and Henry Ford, Emma Goldman and Evelyn Nesbit, Harry K. Thaw and Stanford White, Harry Houdini and Archduke Franz Ferdinand, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, Theodore Dreiser and Arctic explorer Robert E. Peary, Doctorow rearranges events in their lives to interweave them with those of his three fictional families. Thus does he blend fact and fiction to create what some critics termed “faction.” For instance, he has J. P. Morgan and Henry Ford meeting and discussing their common interest in reincarnation. When interviewers asked Doctorow if Morgan and Ford had ever met in real life, he answered, “Well, they have now.” In other words,

the true reality is that of the imagination rather than of history. There is also a Jewish component in *Ragtime*, in that one of the families is that of the poor Jewish immigrant peddler who is identified only as “Tateh” (the Yiddish word for “father”). He is an ardent socialist who rises from New York's Lower East side to become the powerful movie mogul Baron Ashkenazi, who creates the “Our Gang” comedies. Doctorow, then, like Bellow and Roth, is also attempting to point up the difficulty of separating fact from fancy or history from fiction—that is, of finding, grasping, and conveying reality, through the imagination, amid the world's cultural confusions and political tensions.

Doctorow has structured several of his books as a writer's working papers. His *Lives of the Poets*, for example, is presented, the book jacket blurb informs the reader, as “six tense, poignant, and mysterious stories . . . followed by a novella in which the writer emerges from his work to reveal his own mind. Here the images and the themes of the earlier stories become part of the narrator's unsparing confessions about his own life . . . and in this brilliant, funny, and painful story about the story, the writer's mind in all its aspects—its formal compositions, its naked secrets—emerges as a rare look at the creative process and its connection to the heart.” In an interview in the *New York Times Book Review*, Doctorow offered his own thoughts on this work. “I write to find out what I'm writing,” he explained. “In *The Book of Daniel* (1971), I had to find the voice before I could tell the story. In *Lives of the Poets*, I was lucky. The voice came to me.” He considered the book's short stories and novella to be unified. “I found myself writing them in sequence as they appear in the book. As I read the stories over, I discovered a connection, like a mind looking for its own geography. I found that I was creating the character of the person creating them. So I wrote the novella to give him a voice. I saw the possibility of presenting a writer's mind in both formal stories and then in a confessional mode. The novella is the story of the stories.”¹⁰ In Doctorow's more recent novel *City of God* (2000), the reader is again instructed how to read the narrative. “In his workbook,” the reader is informed, “a New York City novelist records the contents of his teeming brain—sketches for stories, accounts of his love affairs, riffs on the meanings of popular songs, ideas for movies, obsessions with cosmic processes. He is a virtual repository of the predominant ideas and historical disasters of the age.”¹¹ One of those “historical disasters,” not surprisingly, is the

Holocaust, which Doctorow here treats with dramatic passion and historical insight.

Philip Roth, like his two esteemed colleagues, has also devoted—and to a much greater degree—a good deal of his fiction in recent years to this postmodernist habit of writing about writing. His protagonists or heroes almost always seem to resemble their author in age and appearance, time and place, and in personal circumstances. But after having teased his readers with such strong parallels, especially in the recurring figure of Nathan Zuckerman, Roth likes to dismiss the autobiographical elements in his work as products of his creative imagination. “Like any writer,” says Roth, “I have only the floor under my feet to stand on. I get my facts from what I see of life and of myself. Then I have to make another world out of them, a world of words that is more interesting than what exists.”¹² On another occasion, he stated: “I think the autobiographical connection in fiction is looser than it appears, even in mine. . . . The level of invention rises and sinks, in each paragraph.”¹³ That is undoubtedly true. His point is that the autobiographical element is almost always present in both his fiction and nonfiction. “Give me a mask and I’ll tell you the truth,” William Butler Yeats once remarked. Roth appears to have taken this thought to heart.¹⁴ Like Bellow, whom he has long admired, Roth places a good deal of importance on memory. In *Patrimony* (1991), his nonfiction account of his father’s painful last months and death, Roth writes: “‘I must remember accurately,’ I told myself, ‘remember everything accurately so that when he is gone I can re-create the father who created me.’ *You must not forget anything.*”¹⁵

In other words, Philip Roth, like Bellow and Doctorow, has also entertained, bemused, and confused critics and readers with his elusive interplay of fiction and autobiography, the creative and “factual,” the invented and real, or what he himself terms “the relationship between the written and the unwritten world.” He has tried to explain to his readership that we are not to read his fiction as autobiography or his alleged autobiography as literal fact. He makes this especially clear in *The Facts: The Autobiography of a Novelist* (1988),¹⁶ most of which is presented as a straightforward account of his life, and much of which *appears* to be just that. Yet the very subtitle, “The Autobiography of a Novelist,” suggests a note of caution. Most experienced readers have learned that no novelist or fiction writer is to be entirely believed when discussing his or her own life. Indeed, when has *any* autobiography been entirely devoid of cre-

ative selection and convenient arrangement of personal details? *Granta* editor Ian Jack put the matter into perspective when speaking of a recently published confessional essay that had drawn considerable public attention: “Honesty, of course, can be a literary device like any other. One can appear to be honest without really being honest.”¹⁷ From Captain John Smith and Benjamin Franklin to the present, autobiographers have tended to create the persona and “truth” they wished to present to the world.

However, Roth is something of an exception in that, as Paul Gray has pointed out, he “has tirelessly insisted on the distinction between the raw material of life and the transforming power of fiction.”¹⁸ Interviewer David Lida has noted several of Roth’s explanations. One example: “Roth does acknowledge similarities between his own fury at writer Irving Howe’s diatribes against his fiction and a climactic moment in *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983) ‘when an outraged Zuckerman makes a ranting phone call to the critic Milton Appel—but he neatly sums up the differences. ‘The rage is absolutely real,’ Roth concedes, ‘but the situation in which it’s embedded is invented. Did I ever call Irving Howe? Of course not. I’m not quite the *schmuck* Zuckerman is,’ he says with a laugh.”¹⁹ Roth has also made this point in print. “In *The Facts*, Roth claims that the most directly factual passages in his work are the scenes in *My Life as a Man* (1974) in which Peter Tarnopol’s wife belatedly confesses to having duped him into marriage by obtaining a urine sample from a pregnant woman and claiming it as her own. ‘I say I couldn’t improve on that,’ says Roth, ‘but if we took that passage I could show you, ‘This is distortion, this is shading, this is total invention, this is a lie.’ It’s all grounded in the autobiographical, but it’s also all invented.’”²⁰

Whether it is his intention here or not, Roth is making the point that *all* fiction is “grounded in the autobiographical.” Wallace Stegner, a highly gifted writer and teacher of writing, has summarized clearly the relationship of the writer to his life and the people in it: “Because he writes fiction in order to reflect or illuminate life, his materials obviously must come out of life,” Stegner noted. “These materials are people, places, things—especially people. If fiction isn’t people it is nothing. . . . The people of his stories and novels will be, inevitably but in altered shapes, the people he himself has known.” Lest anyone miss his point, Stegner then adds: “The flimsy little protestations that mark the front gate of every novel, the solemn statements that any resemblance to real persons living or dead

is entirely coincidental, are fraudulent every time. A writer has no other material to make his people from than the people of his experience. If there is no resemblance to any real person, living or dead, the character is going to be pretty unconvincing. The only thing the writer can do is to recombine parts, suppress some characteristics and emphasize others, put two or three people into one fictional character, and pray the real-life prototypes won't sue."²¹

Very likely, Stegner was not thinking particularly of Roth when penning these comments, but they serve as an accurate gloss on the latter's writing methods. From the start, Roth has shrewdly manipulated his readership into wondering how much of his fiction is fact and how much fiction. His has wished, and generally succeeded, in piquing the interest of his readers. For example, he has done so by swearing at the beginning of a novel like *Operation Shylock* (1993)²² that every word is true and then at the end declaring the entire narrative to be false. In effect, he is having it both ways. Roth even has the *chutzpah* to pretend outrage at the gullibility, if not the mendacity, of readers who want to believe he is exposing his own life. But then, where would Philip Roth be today as a writer if readers had not responded willingly to his teasing, suggestiveness, and trickiness? Conversely, what would be his current literary situation if he had claimed without qualification that in all these years everything he has written about his heroes is essentially true about *his* life? How many would believe him then? He would have been accused of being a poseur, a phony, as was, for example, Jerzi Kosinski, who apparently had added imaginative or creative flourishes to what he insisted had been his own experiences during the Holocaust. Roth, shrewd student of human nature that he is, has been walking a tenuous but carefully constructed tightrope of credibility. It would be difficult to point to a more artful literary dodger at work today. How many readers now think that everything Roth has revealed in his narratives about Neil Klugman, Gabe Wallach, Alexander Portnoy, David Kepesh, Peter Tarnopol, and Nathan Zuckerman is an accurate chronicle of the life of Philip Roth? Undoubtedly such readers are few in number. On the other hand, could not a convinced or "believing" reader argue that *all* the accounts are true—even if they never happened? Is there only one kind of truth—the literal, actual, factual? What if this bemused reader were to argue that every word Roth has made up about his protagonists is psychologically or emotionally or internally "true" of Philip Roth? What if his novels are

read as a basically valid composite psychological profile of Philip Roth-as-human-being, *warts and all*?

At the same time, every writer must recognize that, despite his or her best intentions and despite ardent strivings to be original, certain underlying themes—whether conscious or intuitive—will be embodied in his or her writings. Peter Cooper has succinctly pinpointed Roth's basic artistic and psychological concerns. He points most specifically to Roth's "fiction from the mid 1970s on." Beginning with *My Life as a Man*, Cooper notes that Roth has been examining "how the 'unwritten world' of life experiences becomes transformed in literature and how the 'written world' of literature can affect courses of action taken in life." In doing so, "Roth has assiduously mined his life and background for ore-bearing material, but, he admits, he has 'looked only for what could be transformed' by 'turning the flame up under my life and smelting stories out of all I've known.'" The events that Roth most typically recalls, says Cooper, "document the struggle of the self to realize autonomy in some restrictive environment, often by trying to frame an account of its own history and development." Generally, Roth's protagonist, often a writer himself, will "attempt to compose himself through the act of writing—to exorcise demons from his life, or to impart some sense to it, by putting it into literary form. In these works especially, strategies for narrative expression become strategies for self-discovery and self-definition. Since the characters' strivings parallel the author's, Roth produces a literature that is both psychologically and aesthetically self-conscious." Roth and his central figures, especially "his writer-characters, face the dilemma of choosing between two antithetical styles of personality and narrative expression: that of the polished, high-minded, restrained, and responsible intellectual, whom he calls 'the nice Jewish boy,' and that of the brash, crude, and rebellious iconoclast, whom he dubs 'the Jewboy.'" ²³

As have Bellow and Doctorow, Roth, too, has several times introduced the Holocaust as an important theme into his fiction. He has done so most extensively in *Operation Shylock*, a darkly bitter and intentionally provocative book. The story line has two Philip Roths, a "real" one and an imposter, and a series of highly implausible events and figures. Roth litters his novel with mistaken identities, plots that double back on themselves, references to earlier Roth novels, and allusions to actual Jewish events. All these things are meant to demonstrate Roth's ability to integrate into his art the world in which he lives. In *Operation Shylock*, Roth uses these events to intro-

duce almost all the issues and elements then confronting the State of Israel. We should keep in mind that Roth, throughout his career, has made a game of mixing in both his fiction and nonfiction what is real and what is not. He feels the resulting uncertainty adds to the literary pleasure of both reader and writer. For example, he titles this novel *Operation Shylock: A Confession*. This would seem to imply that the novel deals with actual events. But then Roth mischievously includes in the book itself a concluding "Note to the Reader." It states: "This book is a work of fiction. . . . This confession is false." Any alert reader is likely to think: "Of course it is; after all, the book is a *novel*." Yet in numerous follow-up interviews, Roth insisted that *Operation Shylock* is nonfiction—that it is a record of real events. Such contradictory declarations have greatly upset reviewers. But no thoughtful reader should be upset or even surprised by such behavior on Roth's part. He is merely doing what he has been doing for years. In other words, if his particular story seems too absurd to be true, and his explanations are too contradictory to be credible, Roth is merely reminding us once again that the "facts" of history and life, especially Jewish history and life, are indeed stranger than fiction.

He is also doing what so many of his Jewish literary contemporaries are doing: He is wrestling metaphorically with the lessons of Jewish history and the issues besetting the Jewish people today, especially as these issues are embodied by the horrors of the Holocaust and in the hopes engendered by the beleaguered State of Israel. Here Roth is again seeking some answers to the question of what it means to be a Jew so late in the twentieth century—and, of course, so early in the twenty-first. It is also worth noting that here, as in *Patrimony*, and as had Bellow in *The Bellarosa Connection*, Roth urges his readers not to forget—not to forget their patrimony, their heritage, their debt to the past.

Roth has been as good as his word. He himself, in midcareer, felt the need to take stock of himself as writer and as person, and the result was *The Facts*. Roth bookends his narrative with two letters. The first is a nine-page note from the author to his major literary alter ego, Nathan Zuckerman. The book concludes with a thirty-five-page response from Zuckerman to his creator, Philip Roth. The first letter serves as the book's introduction, and in it Roth explains that he was moved to writing about himself rather than another fictional alter ego by his lingering thoughts of his mother's death in 1981 and his growing realization of his father's failing health at age eighty-six.

He hoped that writing this "life" would enable him to recapture that moment in time when the Family Roth—his mother, father, brother, and he—were still together and all seemed well in their small Newark, New Jersey world. He also offers a second reason. Following minor surgery in 1987, he experienced an emotional breakdown and, to alleviate the resulting depression, he began searching for the vigorous, clear-minded, youthful idealist he had been before he fragmented himself into his various literary alter egos. "If the breakdown itself was partly caused by the strain of remaking himself as myth in the Nathan Zuckerman books," suggests David Denby, "part of the cure was a return to his own identity, to the core self that was beginning to elude him."²⁴ Roth adds his own rationale: "If this manuscript conveys anything," he reasons, "it's my exhaustion with masks, disguises, distortions, and lies."²⁵

True to his word, Roth presents himself and his life, in the 150-page personal chronicle between the two letters, in a low-key, non-dramatic fashion very different from the manic lives of his fictional heroes. Some years earlier, Roth tried to put both his work and life into proper perspective. Asked by an interviewer if his books should be read "as confession, as autobiography barely disguised," Roth seized the occasion. "You should read my books as fiction, demanding the pleasures that fiction can yield," he responded. "I have nothing to confess and no one I want to confess to. Nor has anyone asked me to make a confession or promised forgiveness if I do so." He then added: "As for my autobiography, I can't begin to tell you how dull it would be. My autobiography would consist almost entirely of chapters about me sitting alone in a room looking at a typewriter. The uneventfulness of my autobiography would make Beckett's *The Unnamable* read like Dickens."²⁶

Roth was, as usual, being disingenuous and employing his familiar literary license, as subsequent media accounts of his troubled divorce from actress Claire Bloom revealed. But his claim is in line with the low-key self-portrait he presents in *The Facts*. As David Lida points out, Roth offers himself "as a nice Jewish boy who, after an almost suffocatingly rosy childhood, grew up into a nice Jewish man who 'writes books and wants to be left alone.'"²⁷ But, adds Lida rather shrewdly, "because the book is written with such politesse and filial respect, one is bound to wonder about the unexplained sources of rage that inform so many of Roth's novels. Any autobiography is bound to leave questions unanswered: but in the last chapter of *The Facts*, they are almost all asked—by none other than Nathan Zucker-

man." Lida seems somewhat surprised by this literary ploy. He need not have been. Roth is simply up to one of his oldest tricks: He has often attempted to disarm his critics by asking and answering their questions before they can ask them. Roth even concedes as much: "It's not just a story," he explains, "it's a story that is challenged. That's part of 'a novelist's autobiography.'" ²⁷

Not only is autobiography an important element in Roth's fiction but so also is a sense of *place*. Roth has himself discerned this shaping pattern in his writing. "Ever since *Goodbye, Columbus*," he has noted, "I've been drawn to depicting the impact of place on American lives. *Portnoy's Complaint* is very much the raw response to a way of life that was specific to his American place during his childhood in the 1930s and '40s. The link between the individual and his historic moment may be more focused in the recent trilogy, but the interest was there from the start."²⁸ It is, therefore, instructive to recall that Roth was an English major at Bucknell who went on to take graduate work, albeit briefly, in English at the University of Chicago. In those years, the 1950s, the New Criticism held sway in graduate English departments, and the University of Chicago was the home of the self-designated Aristotelian school of the New Critics. In *The Facts*, Roth is doing what then was expected of every literature student there and elsewhere: he is "explicating the text"—extracting every linguistic, semantic, psychological, or tonal nuance from each word and image. In short, the text was to be explored from every possible point of view. That is, simply put, the task Roth here assigns to his "student," Nathan Zuckerman.

But in recent years Roth has moved far beyond mere narrative explication of his characters and plots. As early as *The Counterlife* (1987), for instance, Roth—as David Denby astutely explains—"abandoned narrative solidity altogether, reviving characters supposedly dead, allowing characters to review their fictional representation, folding fictions within fictions, becoming, in fact, an earnest writer of 'metafiction.'" Denby is right: these, too, are some of the things Roth does in his fiction. But the related question here then would seem to be "why?" Why does Roth write as he does? Many critics and reviewers have offered explanations. But that suggested by Denby seems close to the mark. "Roth's formal games," he reasons, "emerged as the inevitable result of his dialectical habits of mind, habits that have grown obsessive in recent years. He loves to argue, often with himself. By creating a character who 'dies' and

is then reborn—forging a new ego out of the unfulfilled longings of the old—he was carrying out the ultimate argument with himself."²⁹

Clearly then, Philip Roth is both similar to and different from most of his literary colleagues, both professionally and personally. One notable difference meriting mention is his editing of the "Voices from the Other Europe" series for Penguin. This one-time "bad boy of American literature" thereby brought to the attention of the English-reading world the works of besieged and underappreciated Eastern bloc writers. Also unlike many of his literary contemporaries, Roth keeps a relatively low profile between novels. Hence those readers curious to know what is up with this most intriguing of writers must generally await his next novel. And that in itself is, obviously, not a bad thing.

NOTES

1. Saul Bellow, *The Adventures of Augie March* (New York: Viking, 1953).
2. Saul Bellow, *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (New York: Viking, 1970).
3. Saul Bellow, *The Bellarosa Connection* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989). Hereafter referred to as *BC*.
4. *Ibid.*, 2.
5. Saul Bellow, *Ravelstein* (New York: Viking, 2000).
6. E. L. Doctorow, *World's Fair* (New York: Random House, 1985).
7. David Leavitt, "Looking Back on the World of Tomorrow," a review of *World's Fair*, by E. L. Doctorow, *New York Times Book Review*, November 10, 1985, 3.
8. E. L. Doctorow, *Lives of the Poets: Six Stories and a Novella* (New York: Random House, 1984).
9. E. L. Doctorow, *Ragtime* (New York: Random House, 1975).
10. Herbert Mitgang, "Finding the Right Voice," a review of *Lives of the Poets: Six Stories and a Novella*, by E. L. Doctorow, *New York Times Book Review*, November 11, 1984, 36. See also Ben Siegel, "Introduction," in *Critical Essays on E. L. Doctorow*, ed. Ben Siegel (New York: G. K. Hall, 2000), 30.
11. E. L. Doctorow, *City of God* (New York: Random House, 2000).
12. Andrea Chambers, "Philip Roth: Portnoy's Creator Would Like It Known: His Books Are Novels not Confessionals," *People Weekly* (December 19, 1983): 98.
13. David Lida, "Philip Roth Talks—a Little: 'I'm not Quite the Schmuck Zuckerman Is,'" *Vogue* (September 1988): 434.
14. See Edmund White, "The Hearts of Men: Who Knows What Shadows Lurk . . .," *Vogue* (January 1987): 94.
15. Philip Roth, *Patrimony* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 177.
16. Philip Roth, *The Facts: The Autobiography of a Novelist* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988). Hereafter referred to as *Facts*.
17. Jack was referring to Kathryn Chetkovich's essay "Envy," dealing with her relationship with Jonathan Franzen, author of the award-winning novel *The Corrections*. Jack published the essay, concluding, "but she was really honest." See Tim

Rutten, "A Novel End to a Love Affair," *Los Angeles Times Calendar*, July 19, 2003, E1, E23.

18. Paul Gray, "Philip Roth: Novelist," *Time* (July 9, 2001): 50.

19. Lida, "Philip Roth Talks," 434.

20. Ibid. For Roth's detailed chronicling of this incident, see *Facts*, 102–12.

21. Wallace Stegner, *On Teaching and Writing Fiction*, ed. Lynn Stegner (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 4–5.

22. Philip Roth, *Operation Shylock* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993). Hereafter referred to as *OS*.

23. Peter Cooper, *Philip Roth*, Scribner's Writers Series (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1991), 3, 2, 1–2.

24. David Denby, "The Grips of Roth," a review of *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography*, by Philip Roth, *The New Republic* (November 21, 1988): 37.

25. *Facts*, 6.

26. Alan Finkielkraut, "The Ghosts of Roth," *Esquire* (September 1981): 94.

27. Lida, "Philip Roth Talks," 434, 444.

28. Gray, "Philip Roth Novelist," 50.

29. Denby, "The Grips of Roth," 37–38.

Philip Roth's Fictions of Self-Exposure

Debra Shostak

AMONG PHILIP ROTH'S MOST STARTLING GESTURES IN A CAREER THAT HAS not lacked for surprises is his decision in *Deception* (1990) and *Operation Shylock* (1993) to refer to his main character as "Philip" in the former and "Philip Roth" in the latter, breaking decorum about the illusion of an invented persona who directs and dominates the narratives.¹ Each novel advertises itself as a life history, offering its "I" as both ubiquitous eye and actor, and I think we are to retain awareness of the speaker as simultaneously a conventional narrative mask and the historical Philip Roth. Few writers dare to name themselves at the center of their inventions, which is why it is so arresting to find a work of fiction that pronounces its author's name within the text. Because readers are frequently tempted, from either prurient interest or more impartial motives, to discern autobiography in a fictional narrative, most writers of fiction seem to labor out of modesty, a sense of privacy, or a display of imaginative capacities to erase the traces of their own lives from their work.

Not so Philip Roth. Especially since his invention of Nathan Zuckerman, Roth has encouraged readers to interpret the narrating voice of his fiction as a self-revealing "I," a Roth surrogate who, by the time of *Deception* and *Operation Shylock*, is no longer a surrogate but is "Roth" himself. Roth is preoccupied with self-performance, with projections of the self's voice into the other—with, for example, the figure of impersonation that appears in *The Counterlife* (1986) or of ventriloquism that appears in *Sabbath's Theater* (1995).² What I argue here is not that Roth is, strictly, writing autobiographically, but rather that he makes capital out of his readers' inclinations toward biographical interpretations of his work. The "Roth" in the text must always be read in quotation marks, even when seemingly most unmediated, in order to underscore the indeterminacy of the "Roth" who appears in each narrative and to distinguish this narrativized "Roth" from the man who writes the books and lives in Con-

necticut—a distinction the texts labor to obscure. I would argue further that there is a recognizable arc to Roth's career in regard to what I call here his fictions of self-exposure. His interest in the place of the autobiographical in fiction can be traced with some precision to show how he arrives at naming himself in the novels of the late 1980s and early 1990s and then exhausts the need for self-reference to return to the guises of the overtly fictive.³ Along the way, Roth's gestures of self-exposure create peculiar tensions within the novels as well as within the reader-text relationship, allowing inquiry not only into the meaning of "autobiography" but also more broadly into the relationship between fiction and fact and into the process by which readers interpret evidence.

Roth's interest in exploiting autobiographical references—in offering "Roth" to varying degrees within narrative contexts—seems largely to have emerged from his entanglement with his readers during his first years of publication. Some early readers accused him of mining untransformed material from his life, of writing autobiography every time he wrote a novel; he was castigated for doing what in fact his readers mistakenly took him to be doing—for exposing himself and those nearest him. Roth was charged with anti-Semitism and self-hatred after the appearance of *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959), and the essay "Writing About Jews" (1963) attests to the sensitive nerve that his readers hit.⁴ His outrage seemed to bubble to the surface with *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969)⁵ in ways that made the metaphor of self-exposure all too literal for some readers. Any reader of Roth who sees his name in the same sentence as "self-exposure" is likely to think first of *Portnoy's Complaint*, where Roth broke taboos with the notorious descriptions of Alex Portnoy's compulsive masturbation and the unflattering portraits of Portnoy's Jewish family. The confessional mode of Roth's narration caused some readers naively to take the book as thinly disguised autobiography, causing him to complain that "a novel in the guise of a confession was received and judged by any number of readers as a confession in the guise of a novel."⁶ Roth's exposure of both sex and Jewishness in the novel breached the ordinary contract between writer and reader, because both matters seemed too intimately represented to have been dreamed up. What is most taboo is accordingly most unrepresentable; to narrate the unspeakable is to suggest peculiar access to its facts. Roth's transgressions against cultural prohibitions seemed to produce a corollary transgression against narrative convention: the novel eroded the assumption, in place since the realists dominated

the nineteenth century, that a first-person narrator is necessarily a fiction, no matter how compellingly "real."

Given Roth's protestations at being faulted for making the translation from life to art credible, the apparent autobiographical turn in his fiction by the mid-1970s is surprising. It is as if, following the reception of *Goodbye, Columbus* and *Portnoy's Complaint*, he said, "All right, you want 'Roth,' I'll give you 'Roth.'" The writer has given us "Roth" in the work of the last two decades mainly in two related ways: through the adoption of narrators who seem only minimally displaced from Roth's own voice; and through thinly disguised references to details from his biography. *Portnoy* provides an example of the former strategy. The latter is exemplified by *My Life as a Man* (1974), which offers a "Roth" in disguise, in fact doubly disguised.⁷ "Roth" exists in the young writer Peter Tarnopol who invents his own fictional alter ego, Nathan Zuckerman, who, in turn, narrates "Salad Days" and "Courting Disaster," the two stories that constitute the "Useful Fictions" of the book's first section. The Zuckerman persona allows Tarnopol to project into narrative form his anger and angst over "a career in which being married and then trying to get unmarried would become my predominant activity and obsession."⁸ That Tarnopol's marital career hews in significant ways to the marriage that Roth himself suffered in the early 1960s and recounts at length in *The Facts* (1988)⁹ might well cause readers to believe that Roth, like Tarnopol, was using the autobiographical form of fiction as a way to master the traumatic events of his life.¹⁰

After Tarnopol avails himself of Zuckerman's voice, he becomes dissatisfied with this mode of autobiographical displacement, at which point Roth cautiously sets up a tension between the efficacy of fiction and of untransformed "facts" to represent the deepest truths. Tarnopol shifts to "My True Story," his own first-person narrative, following a preface that announces that he "is preparing to forsake the art of fiction for a while and embark upon an autobiographical narrative."¹¹ In imitating the autobiographical voice in this last, most powerful rendering of Tarnopol's struggle, Roth seems to support the principle that the least displaced material—the facts given narrative shape but not imaginatively altered detail—offers the most knowledge and, perhaps, the greatest therapeutic satisfaction. In the closing line of the novel, "This me who is me being me and none other,"¹² Tarnopol seems to assert the truth value of the unmasked persona. But this assertion is undermined by our awareness that Peter Tarnopol is simply a persona, a useful fic-