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Senior Projects Spring 2015

Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects

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Spring 2015

## Philip Roth/Nathan Zuckerman/Philip Roth Written/Written/ Unwritten

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### Recommended Citation

Gibbs, Grayson, "Philip Roth/Nathan Zuckerman/Philip Roth Written/Written/Unwritten" (2015). *Senior Projects Spring 2015*. 80.

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## Introduction

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*"...and the likeness to him was wonderful."*

- *Book 23, line 106-7. p. 475. The Iliad. Translated by Richmond Lattimore.*

*"Think of the ventriloquist. He speaks so that his voice appears to proceed from someone at a distance from himself. But if he weren't in your line of vision you'd get no pleasure from his art at all. His art consists of being present and absent; he's most himself by simultaneously being someone else, neither of whom he "is" once the curtain is down. You don't necessarily, as a writer, have to abandon your biography completely to engage in an act of impersonation. It may be more intriguing when you don't. You distort it, caricature it, parody it, you torture and subvert it, you exploit it—all to give the biography that dimension that will excite your verbal life."*

- *Philip Roth, Interviewed by Hermione Lee, The Art of Fiction No. 84, The Paris Review*

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Few writers have been subject to as much subjective commentary as Philip Roth. Each party, it seems, has its own take on the writer. For a long time, particularly during the stronger portions of the feminist movement, Roth was considered misogynist. After the publication of works like *Goodbye Columbus and Five Short Stories*, he was judged anti-semitic. After *Portnoy's Complaint*, he was deemed debased. Roth has been pigeonholed, determined, proclaimed, situated, decided upon. He has been called the perverted uncle of letters, a

provocateur of manners, a traitor to his people. The writer is hated or praised depending on the enclave interpreting him. The point is that Philip Roth has an interaction with the public unlike few writers; that is, few readerships have such such a dynamic reaction to their writers as Philip Roth have and few writers have played with their readership as Philip Roth has. That is mostly because Philip Roth's books confuse *realities*. They muddy the differences between life and play, the as-is and as-is-possible, the happened and the fabricated.

Roth, as an author criticized for decisions in regards to women and religion, has just as much been concerned with identity. His usage has transformed over his career, from writing about a writer, Nathan Zuckerman, whose life resembles Roth's closely, to ultimately inserting himself into his fiction, with his own name and ostensible life's facts. Roth has had a general trajectory from being a writer who it is suspected writes about himself to a writer who outrightly writes about himself with descriptions that the reader believes must be him. It *seems* definitely to be a real account of the writer's life inside of his pieces of work that he calls fiction. In *The Counterlife*, Nathan's brother Henry, in his eulogy of the writer, repeatedly brings up the constant accusation of whether or not Nathan's fiction was actually fictitious or directly derived from real life. "Is it fiction?" has been the question asked of Roth arguably since the publication of his second book, *Letting Go*. Roth has written about writers in most of his works since his extremely well-received, yet hugely controversial *Goodbye, Columbus* and the accompanying five short stories that went with it. I believe that after Roth published *Portnoy's Complaint*, the focus of his writing changed forever.

When he received wide acclaim and attention for *Goodbye, Columbus*, he was twenty-six. It was published in the last year of the 1950s, and won the National Book Award for 1960. With critical praise, it received huge criticism from Jews who considered stories like

“Defender of the Faith” embarrassments that perpetuated unattractive stereotypes. The same year that the movie version of *Goodbye, Columbus* came out, 1969, his most famous book, arguably ever, *Portnoy’s Complaint*, was published.

After *Portnoy’s Complaint*, Roth was accorded a fame that few writers of his age are ever given, no doubt due to his talent and work. Whether his subsequent focus on the writer’s life was because of this or a subject he would have concerned himself with regardless is speculative. Still, I think Roth’s concentration on the subject of a writer’s life cannot be discounted to his early success as a writer.

I don’t rely on a gut instinct to take this approach. In both *Goodbye, Columbus* and *Portnoy’s Complaint*, Roth had a lively exchange with his detractors and defamers. Roth was, from the get-go, an intellectual about his work, not simply a creator who left his words amenable to the interpretation of the public. He riposted critical accusations with critical answers. Roth was intellectual about his articulations, and, while perhaps a reluctant responder to the critical dialogue, a strident, avid responder nonetheless. This early intellectualism and responsiveness, I believe, transformed from a public and binary exchange about his earlier works to a private and tertiary explosion in his later works. That is, at first the intellectual exchange was outside of his work, while later it *became* his work.

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Philip Roth was, particularly at the start of his career, criticized by some of the most vocal cultural activists and interventionists of the 20th century: fellow Jews and feminists. Roth published began publishing books in the first three decades after the Holocaust (the anti-semitic heartthrob *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories* was published about 14 years after V-day) as well as at the start and height of the 1960s American feminist movement.

Roth early on defended himself in publications like *Commentary*, (find others, they are there). One rabbi famously asked, “What is being done to silence this man?” before responding, “Medieval Jews would have known what to do with him.” Some in the Jewish rabbinical crowd went so far as to say that the stereotypes of Jews that Roth perpetuated in his works were the same kind that caused the Holocaust. In 1962, at a Yeshiva University forum, Roth vowed to “never write about Jews again.” Roth was at the center of a literary maelstroms in a tumultuous time. “Roth is a self-hating Jew.” “Roth is depraved.” “Roth objectifies women.” Sentiments like these were aimed at him *en masse*. “And still the rabbis rage,” a writer proclaimed in a 1964 *Chicago Review*. As Roth himself said, he was called “dangerous, dishonest, and irresponsible.”<sup>1</sup>

Roth responded though. He said in a 1963 6,800-word *Commentary* article “Writing About Jews,” “Not only do they [certain Jewish readers and critics] seem to me often to have cramped and untenable notions of right and wrong, but looking at fiction as they do—in terms of ‘approval’ and ‘disapproval’ of Jews, ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ attitudes toward Jewish life—they are likely not to see what it is that the story is really about” (*Commentary*, Roth). This article had 23 Letters to the Editor published, including three from rabbis. *Commentary* then printed an ensuing dialogue through letters between the insulting rabbis which he referenced in his original article. Rabbi Emanuel Rackman of Congregation Shaaray Tefila in Far Rockaway, New York, blithely wrote “So we have censured each other and thus verbalized our sense of outrage.” Roth responded with numerically-organized answers to each of his combatants: “I should like to clarify certain matters of fact that have been raised

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<sup>1</sup> The Rabbi who called him this later, in a *Commentary* Letter-to-the-Editor, wrote, “Nowhere in my sermon did I refer to his writings in *Goodbye, Columbus* or elsewhere as ‘dangerous, dishonest or irresponsible.’; There must be some internal irritant in Roth’s ‘psychological shell’ which . . . accounts for his sensitivity to honest criticism.”

by three correspondents.” For example, to “*Dr. Seligson*,” his second rebuttal is about the aforementioned critical description of Roth: “(2) It is true Dr. Seligson did not call my work ‘dangerous, dishonest, or irresponsible,’ but then he is not quoted as having said that. He is mistakenly attributing to himself adjectives used by me in my opening sentence to describe both the kind and the extent of the charges made against my first book.” In the first decade of his career, Roth’s written engagement with his vocal critics was pathological and unrelenting.

Roth’s responses took the form of articulate articles written for a public readership—texts which were no less printed than his books. If Roth believed in the precept of a silent authorial presence, he did not abide to it, but was, in fact, somewhere closer to the opposite. Whether his publicists, agents, or publishing house recommended that he be so responsive is unknown. What any reader can see, however, from the existing non-fiction texts, is Roth’s enthusiastic, meticulous, and spirited defense of his prose, and, more importantly, his purpose as a fiction writer. His *cause celebre*. His *cause celebre* to himself. His new mission. His heartfelt hit that itched him too much.

In that same *Commentary* article, Roth attempted to explain his take on fiction, but, after a paragraph describing the merits of the art, wrote, “I do not care to go at length here into what a good many readers take for granted are the purposes and possibilities of fiction.” While he did provide an answer, albeit not “at length,” I believe many of Roth’s future works themselves death with the “purposes and possibilities” of fiction more than fiction itself. He used the device itself as an object to be examined, not merely what it did. In this sense, Roth’s later works seems not just functionalist, a novel as a conveyer, but an examiner of the object itself.

Roth created a vast arsenal to engage and combat authorial and literary attacks, and I believe these methods ultimately became his subject and style, a pre-defensive, presupposed conversation to a preconceived reader. Roth has ever since made his career a refraction of the writerly life, exploring time-space boundary between fiction and reality, the written and the unwritten. Roth, perhaps, is a product of his myth as much as his own imagination.

Has Roth inherently allowed the response to his fiction to guide his life, and hence turned it into reality? When you have a pulpit as big as Roth's, the fiction becomes in effect just as valid as the reality. What he writes, people talk about. What he experiences becomes his aura, his myth, his possibility.

Thus, what commentary about Roth's perspective of reality, informed through years as a novelist writing books from a novelist's perspective? What can be seen from his writing not so much about the fictitious and the imaginary, but the "written" versus "unwritten" worlds?

Most importantly, how does the the verbal life, which encompasses both the written and the spoken, effect Roth's fiction, the reader, and the medium of the novel?

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In a way, Roth's writing is interactive because it (I believe) often involves a reader who supposes it "knows" Roth. A sense of familiarity is grown out of the large "story world" that Roth has created in the Zuckerman and "Roth" novels. Nathan Zuckerman can be (and has been) easily viewed as a stand-in for Philip Roth: Roth uses events from his own life as material for the narrator and character Zuckerman. To some, Roth is Zuckerman, Zuckerman is Roth. Roth was certainly aware of this when he first wrote about a writer writing a book called *Carnovsky* that so closely mirrored his own *Portnoy's Complaint*.

Similarly, he was aware that by using a character called “Philip Roth,” readers would likely compare that writer with the real person, although ironically more cautiously and suspiciously than with Zuckerman, an idea that I will approach later. However, Roth has shown a trend towards uniting his public persona, his authorial self, and his fictional characters: a writer, a writer, and a writer. What one does influences the others and back again. This dialectic is part of the excitement and provocation that comes from reading a Philip Roth novel.

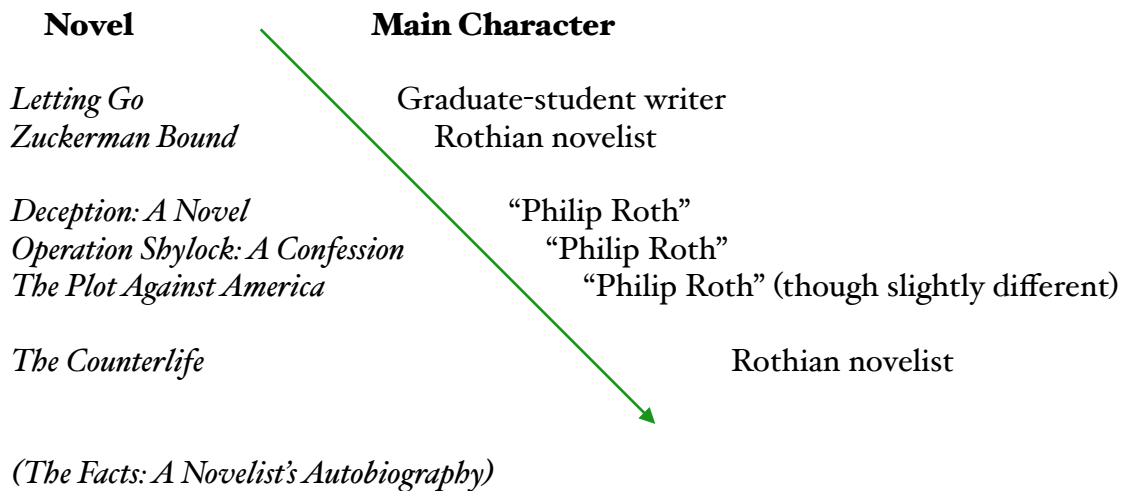
For Philip Roth, readers often attempt to make judgments on his work based on their “world knowledge” of him. He appears to offer a “factual” story, but the verisimilitude of the story is very hard to discern. His fiction seems to border so closely his own reality that many readers question if often what they read by him is fiction at all. Roth overtly plays with “facts.” Readers conjecture back. Roth has created a fiction that is interesting despite it being so personal, semi-autobiographical, or autobiographically-derived or inspired. Roth is insulted by the idea that he “has no imagination.” The success of his fiction may result in part from the interactivity it offers to readers. Readers with a stable base in reality, regardless of if that base is actually real, projected, or assumed, can derive many benefits from such a set-up. By following a character they feel, they can derive differences between the real and the fictitious. This seems to have an important position for a both readers of entertainment and readers trying to get something out of their fiction.

### **Roth Lines**

Roth has had an evolution in his writing that I have *crudely* attempted to “rank” in terms of their writerliness to ultimately their “post-modernness.” At first there is a



concentration on stories about writers and the writerly life, then stories about writers who resemble Roth, to, ultimately, by the time of *Operation Shylock*, stories about characters with the name “Philip Roth.” The purpose of a ranked list of Roth’s works is not for scientific clarity, but merely as a rough means of illustrating the transformation for the later purpose of an exploration as to what these decisions did to the concentration of Roth’s work. I believe that Roth quickly transformed into a heavily metafictional writer, and that he uses not just shifts in narrative voices, but shifts in the whole fictitious framework of a story. From the writerly to the metafictional and post-modern:



## ***The Counterlife***

*The Counterlife* is nearly impossible to summarize. It consists of five sections: “Basel,” “Judea,” “Aloft,” “Gloucestershire,” and “Christendom.” Tempting as it is to call them neatly separable alternate realities, they are not. Here, however, I have presented as basically as possible the summaries of each section, while in the following pages I will discuss the intricacies.

In “Basel,” Henry Zuckerman, married New Jersey dentist and brother of the prolific Roth-esque writer and *The Counterlife*'s narrator Nathan Zuckerman, risks the dangers of elective heart surgery in order to cease taking the medications which—while saving him from a heart attack prevent him from being able to have sex. To continue his lusty affair with his young dental assistant, Henry undergoes the surgery, but dies during the operation.

In “Judea,” Henry actually survives the operation from “Basel,” but ends up actually very unhappy. After tremendous post-operation depression, he ultimately ends up as a “religionationalistic” radical in Israel. Nathan travels to Israel in an attempt to retrieve him back to his life in America, but is unsuccessful.

In “Aloft,” Nathan is flying back from Israel to England, where he has moved to live with his new English wife, Maria. The plane is hijacked by a young man who Nathan met while in Israel, and he is implicated as an accomplice by undercover agents aboard the plane.

In “Gloucestershire,” the first three sections never happened. In this section, Nathan—not his brother Henry—has heart disease. Nathan kindles an intense affair *sans* intercourse with a married Englishwoman named Maria who lives in the apartment upstairs with her baby and abusive husband. Nathan and Maria have lengthy conversations, but

cannot form a sexual bond because of his erection-preventing heart medication. Like Henry in “Basel,” Nathan undergoes surgery, but dies during the operation.

In “Christendom,” Nathan’s life as it was in the previous sections continues; he has his dream life, which includes becoming a “daddy,” with his young Maria in England, but his life there is met with nasty anti-semitism from the English people, including his new wife’s family. This causes a rift in the new couples relationship. “Christendom” is the most confusing of the sections as it is not clear whether Nathan and Maria ever really married and she became pregnant, or if—during the affair in which Nathan seduces Maria into leaving her husband to become his wife—Maria had simply secretly read Nathan’s manuscript of their could-be life and decided that their affair should not go further.<sup>2</sup>

Overall, in *The Counterlife*, there are four eulogies (two publicly, which hide the actual, and two thought, which reveal it), five letters, a journalistic Q&A dialogue (at first, seemingly public, but ultimately an internal conversation with Nathan’s ghost), three manuscripts (two burned, one published), a bevy of interspersing writer’s notes, meticulously constructed speeches, and myriad mental alterations of other characters’ words. This inventory is a superficial measuring stick to appraise the value of the verbal in *The Counterlife*. However, to begin with, it shows the intensity of media-within-medium that Roth has embedded into this detailed, confusing “novel.”

There are, however, moments when these conventional written or verbal embedments, e.g. letters or eulogies, offer somewhat crude identifications of the plots and characters from which to contrast other accounts in this large “possible worlds” story book. The most difficult example to elucidate, but also the richest, is in the relationship,

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<sup>2</sup> Confused over all the “Marias?” “Nathan called all shiksas Maria—the explanation seemed as ludicrously simple as that.”

throughout *The Counterlife*, between the Zuckerman brothers and their Marias, particularly between Nathan and his 27 year-old English Maria.

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Nathan Zuckerman, in *The Counterlife*, provides an entryway into the inner world of a writer. Nathan has harvested his brother Henry's personal tribulations as fodder for fiction for years. After his brother's funeral, in "Basel," Nathan begins to fantasize about the possible routes that his brother's life may have taken in regards to his familial and romantic lives:

While peeing in the upstairs bathroom, he thought, 'Suppose on that afternoon she'd secretly come to the house, after they married each other by performing anal love, he watched her, right in this room, pinning up her hair before getting in with him to take a shower. Seeing him adoring her—seeing his eyes marvel at this strange European woman who embodies simultaneously both innocent domesticity and lurid eroticism—she says, confidently smiling, 'I really look extremely Aryan with my hair up and my jaw exposed.' 'What's wrong with that?' he asks. 'Well, there's a quality in Aryans that isn't very attractive—as history has shown.' 'Look,' he tells her, 'let's not hold the century against you...'

No, that's not them, thought Zuckerman, and came down the stairs into the living room, where Wendy was still nowhere to be seen. But then it needn't be 'them'—could be me, he thought. Us. What if instead of the brother whose obverse existence mine inferred—and who himself untwinnishly inferred me—I had been the Zuckerman boy in that agony? What is the real wisdom of that predicament? Could it be simple for anyone? (TC, 42)

This excerpt from "Basel" shows the mind of this fictional fiction writer at work, expanding what-ifs and entertaining questions that will be explored in subsequent sections. Indeed, Nathan in "Gloucestershire" becomes the "Zuckerman boy in that agony." "What is the real wisdom" of a complex predicament for another human being and "could anything so complex be simple for anyone" are questions that this novel explores inherently in its form. The form itself is naturally empathetic. It conjectures different characters' responses to a somewhat similar situations, the narrator himself included, as well as shows the possible routes that life can take for an infinite amount of reasons.

*The Counterlife* makes multiple existences possible—not through the telling of four equally possible independent stories, nor through science fiction nor magical realism, but by acknowledging that its stories are written by a fiction writer in a fictional medium. *The Counterlife* is effective and elegant because of its strides towards self-acknowledgment as a novel. As important as its self-conscious fictitiousness, however, is its emphasis on the power of the verbal. I strongly believe that in Roth's work, the process of writing is a source of empowerment, of control, of rationality, of choice, and, ultimately, of freedom. This concept is illustrated in characters and story, as well as form, but most importantly, how they work together. "The verbal life" is a way to convert the past, the present, and the future into what one likes. Through instruments as simple as verb tenses, the past, present, and future can be formed. It is how fantasies and the inner life are turned into reality. That is why Roth's work, in my opinion, is so existential, questioning issues like determinism and free will.

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Literacy means the ability both to read and to write. To put it crudely, *The Counterlife* seems to promote a written-type of literacy more than it does a reading-type of literacy, at least in the context of the type of work by Roth that I'm focusing on. It's promoted as much as it can be given that it is still a novel, not some kind of experimental, interactive writing exercise with a reader ("wreader?" "wriider?"). For Roth's *The Counterlife*, the written seems more positive and active, while what is read is more negative and passive. It shows the ability of the writer to create. The writer has the power; the writer transforms his or her existence.

Maria, for instance, is constantly referring to herself as “passive.” The only idea that Maria finds accurate about herself in the fictional piece she that she finds written by Nathan is that she is “deeply passive.” After Nathan dies from his elective heart operation in “Gloucestershire,” Maria reads his manuscript “Christendom,” and comes to believe that he never understood her because of her passivity: “I think he never understood that side of me. I like to passively enjoy my life. I never wanted to be anything or to do anything” (TC, 250).

Nathan’s writing identifies the past’s, present’s, and future’s possible tumult, while Maria prefers to enjoy life as it unfolds and in the moment. Maria dislikes Nathan’s take on the past: “You and I argue, and twentieth-century history comes looming up, and at its most infernal.” She dislikes him for his take on the present: “...a life without horrible difficulties... is inimical to the writer you are. You actually like to take things hard. You can’t weave your stories otherwise” (TC, 316). Most importantly, and of course as a result of Nathan’s take on the past and present, Maria hates the future he has invented, despite its fictitiousness, that is the story within *The Counterlife*. In her letter to Nathan, in response to her having read the future life that he has created, she writes, “You want to play reality-shift? Get yourself another girl. I’m leaving. When I see you now in the lift or down in the foyer collecting your mail, I will pretend, though it may only be the two of us who are there, that we have never been anything other than neighbors...” (TC, 318).

Importantly, Nathan’s and Maria’s approaches to how they live their lives are evidenced in their writing styles: “You didn’t seem to realize that writing for me isn’t everything about my existence wrestling to be born but just some stories about the mists and the Gloucestershire meadows” (TC, 315). She goes on, “And I didn’t realize that even a

woman as passive as I has to know when to run for her life.” For Maria, writing “some stories about the mists and the Gloucestershire meadows” is opposite to what Nathan writes. “Tranquility,” she says, “is disquieting to you, Nathan, in writing particularly—it’s bad art to you, far too comfortable for the reader and certainly for yourself” (TC, 316).

Ultimately, what becomes the answer to Maria’s passivity, more specifically her discontent, is her act of writing. It is not the imitative 19th century-type of writing she has written before, but a new kind of writing. The writing’s placement is unclear—it could range from a journal to a novel—but the effect is not. “My life began again,” she says, “when I absolutely gave up on him, and started writing again, and met you—all sorts of things happened that were really wonderful” (TC, 253). This writing to the ghost of Nathan who, after provocative conversations about transformation and other potential lives, provided her the right audience to give her words. For a writer like Roth so concerned with the reader, Maria’s discovery of the ghost of Nathan as a recurrent addressee is essential to effective writing. “Keep talking,” he tells her. “I will. I will,” she says, continuing, “I know now what a ghost is. It is the person you talk to. That’s a ghost. Someone who’s still so alive that you talk to them and talk to them and never stop. A ghost is the ghost of a ghost. It’s my turn now to invent you” (TC, 255). Maria’s power to put existence into words is her power to invent and to take control. The verbalizer has power. Even Maria’s two year-old daughter exemplifies this attitude about writing. The ghost of Nathan asks Maria how her little girl is doing. Maria replies, “Very well. She can speak so well now. ‘I want a piece of paper.’ ‘I want a pencil.’ ‘I’m going outside’” (TC, 255). The daughter’s first requests are for tools to write, to verbalize.

Carol, Henry's wife, provides another example of the power of verbalization. In her eulogy of her husband, she describes a man who underwent heart surgery that wasn't imperative for the sake of his marriage, "who died to recover the fullness and richness of married love" (TC, 25). In the audience, Nathan wonders if Carol knew of Henry's affairs, including his affair with his assistant, Wendy, who was the real reason he underwent the surgery. He wonders if she remained silent simply for the sake of their family. He thinks to himself of Carol, "Either what she'd told everyone from the altar was what she truly believed, either she was a good-hearted, courageous, blind, loyal mate whom Henry had fiendishly deceived to the last, or she was a more interesting woman than he'd ever thought, a subtle and persuasive writer of domestic fiction, who had cunningly reimagined a decent, ordinary, adulterous humanist as a heroic martyr to the connubial bed" (TC, 47). Put simply, Nathan imagines Carol imagining how to cover up both Henry's affairs and her knowledge of them. There is either Carol the tenderhearted but duped or Carol the knowing but deliberate, and because of these two Carols, there are potentially two Henrys: Henry the real dope or Henry the manipulative. There is Carol who loved her husband or Carol who says may he rot for his "nightly blow job" from his assistant Wendy.

In a rather passive way like Maria, Carol says, "...I'm not someone who makes miracles happen; I'm someone who tends to make do with what's at hand—even, I'm afraid, with her own imperfections." "But Henry," she continues, "would no more accept imperfection in himself than in his work." While Carol proclaims to be loving and admiring, Nathan cannot help but construct a counter-conversation with a knowing Carol. In Nathan's fantasies of this knowing version of Carol as a "writer of domestic fiction," Nathan sees, even if imaginarily, the power of a verbal mastery. Carol, at the podium delivering the eulogy,



was the ultimate teller of her life's destiny. She told the story, word by word, to the people in her life. She delivered a carefully curated speech, wrote the historical end of her husband. It had a skeptic like most stories do, as evidenced on page 37 when Cousin Essie talks to Nathan (initials added):

- N: "It's not so shmucky when you're impotent at thirty-nine," said Zuckerman, "and have reason to think it might never end."  
E: "Being up at the cemetery isn't going to end either."  
N: "He expected to live, Essie. Otherwise he wouldn't have done it."  
E: "And all for the little wife."  
N: "That's the story."  
E: "I like better the ones you write".

However, Carol's eulogy (one of four in *The Counterlife*) told a very elucidated story, down to the morals and dramatics. Unlike the undelivered eulogies composed by Nathan and Henry about each other's deaths, this eulogy is, at least to Nathan and hence the reader, an all-around fiction. Whether Carol was complicit in its existence, even after Henry's death maintaining the facade, or if Henry was the sole author of it, and it was naively retold by Carol, the words served a huge purpose.

Carol's extensive fabrication would be a triumph because it kept her family together and because she "never wanted to see her husband" "hysterical" and "begging" like he was when she found out about his first affair. If Carol was deceived by Henry, than she was deceived, and she lost her husband because for reasons other than the ones she believed. If she knew about the affairs and maintained a marriage and a family despite Henry's actions, than she had, at the very least, determined a part of her future. Furthermore, if Carol was complicit, as Nathan imagined her to be, it would only further support the empowerment

and power of words: during his eulogy she was the writer of the story of the end of Henry's life.

If Henry had succeeded on the other hand, duping Carol, he would maintain his potency that was for him the only feeling of freedom in his life. In the case of Carol and Henry, the course of a family, of a man, or of the woman weaving a story around that man, all depend on verbal fabrications. In either case in this example—if Henry succeeded or if Carol succeeded—it would be so because they successfully contrived stories through careful word picking.

Nathan, imagining Henry's previous affair, even recalled his brother's feeling of "victory" in moving to Basel with Maria if he could "pull it off." While deciding about his choice to abscond to Basel with Maria, he reads the Fodor's *Switzerland*; it's a country where the old is "merging imperceptibly with the new" (TC, 39). The text of the travel book *Switzerland* is the source Henry looks to for articulation while "trying to make up his mind" as to what life he will choose: Carol or Maria, New Jersey or Switzerland, old life or new life.

This portion of *The Counterlife* situation brings to attention an excerpt from Roth's *Paris Review* interview published in 1984<sup>3</sup> (two years before the publication of *The Counterlife*):

You don't necessarily, as a writer, have to abandon your biography completely to engage in an act of impersonation. It may be more intriguing when you don't. You distort it, caricature it, parody it, you torture and subvert it, you exploit it—all to give the biography that dimension that will excite your verbal life. Millions of people do this all the time, of course, and not with the justification of making literature. They *mean* it. It's amazing what lies people can sustain behind the mask of their real faces. Think of the art of the adulterer: under tremendous pressure and against enormous odds, ordinary husbands and wives, who would freeze with self-consciousness up on a stage, yet in the theater of the home, alone

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<sup>3</sup> The Paris Review. 1984

before the audience of the betrayed spouse, they act out roles of innocence and fidelity with flawless dramatic skill.

In this excerpt, Roth certainly fuses the “verbal life” with a somehow distorted life that can lead to otherwise unavailable possibilities—exciting possibilities. Even in this interview piece, for Roth, distortion of reality through words—fiction, arguably—is a means to newness.

The relationship between Henry and Nathan is, of course, filled with a writer versus non-writer power play, almost as if it’s a sort of zero-sum game. When Nathan dies, Henry ultimately spurns the chance to eulogize him, at least publicly during his funeral. However, in his head, like the speech that his other incarnation in “Judea” delivers that “was one of those speeches that people spend hours preparing and delivering while lying in bed unable to sleep,” Henry manifests a verbal tirade against his brother, belittling him and forming him into the place that he could not while he was alive. This emancipation from a life under the control of a writer’s formations, and the sudden empowerment as result of that emancipation, seems similar to the power that Maria feels when she says that her life started when Nathan died and she “absolutely gave up on” him, which is also in an apparently unspoken yet heavily verbal conversation, down to the journalistic, question-and-answer dialogue.

Henry transforms from a man who has suffered an “inchoate, debilitating depression” into a follower of a verbose, “word-whipping” radical. Even Zuckerman, the famous, lauded writer, cannot compete with Henry’s prolix new hero, Rabbi Mordecai Lippman. “If I had nothing to say to Henry right off,” Zuckerman says, “it was because, following Lippman’s seminar, language didn’t really seem my domain any longer.” Although he “wasn’t exactly a

stranger to disputation,” he had never in his life “felt so enclosed by a world so contentious, where the argument is enormous and constant and everything turns out to be pro or con, positions taken, positions argued, and everything italicized by indignation and rage.” Nathan is aghast at the rhetorical power of Lippman and the lopsided effect it has. Rather than respond (“From time to time I’d thought, ‘Fuck it, Zuckerman, why don’t you say what you think—all these bastards are saying what they think.’), his “way of handling Lippman had been by being practically mute.” He says, after the dinner during which the onslaught had occurred, “the simple truth is I was outclassed.”

Of course, Henry latches onto a verbally potent figure in “Judea,” but when they’re together he himself never outdoes his brother in the latter’s ability to characterize and transform those around him into a fiction of his own making. After all, Zuckerman wasn’t in Judea “just as his brother” since, “observed solely from the novelist’s point of view...this was far and away Henry’s most provocative incarnation” and the most eminently exploitable.” Certainly around Zuckerman, Henry, “even assertive, even packing that pistol, even with the best of Lippman bled into his veins,...seemed to me far more trapped than he did in New Jersey, someone utterly swamped and overcome.” When Nathan intervenes to expose the rationale for why Henry is with Lippman—that the Rabbi actually resembles Nathan’s and Henry’s own father who was an “aggressive bully,” “hambone actor,” and “compulsive talker”—Henry retorts, “Oh, no, please, no—save the psychoanalysis for the great American public.” “Wearily he said, ‘Spare me,’” Nathan recounts.

The following important rejoinder from Henry speaks to—besides issues such as sibling rivalry (of which Henry has always lost)—what he perceives as his injured selfhood

under his brother's authorial rule. However, in reading this passage, I would urge that the word "psychology" and Henry's use of that concept be intentionally conflated with the writer's objective to characterize and articulate:

"Look—" he said, and jumped up suddenly as though to go for my throat, "—you're a very intelligent man, Nathan, you're very subtle, but you have one large defect—the only world that exists for you is the world of psychology. That's your revolver. Aim and fire—and you've been firing it at me all my life. Henry is doing this because he wants to please Momma and Poppa, Henry is doing this because he wants to please Carol—or displease Carol, or displease Momma, or displease Poppa. On and on and on it goes. It's never Henry as an autonomous being, it's always Henry on the brink of being a cliché—my brother the stereotype. And maybe that was once even so, maybe I was a man who kept dropping into the stereotype, maybe that accounts for a lot of the unhappiness that I felt back home. Probably you think that the ways I choose to 'rebel' are only stereotypical. But unfortunately for you I'm not someone who's only his simple, silly motives. All my life you've been right on top, like a guy guarding me in a basketball game. Won't let me take one lousy shot. Everything I throw up you block. There's always the explanation that winds up belittling me. Crawling all over me with your fucking thoughts. Everything I do is predictable, everything I do lacks depth, certainly compared to what you do. 'You're only taking that shot, Henry, because you want to score.' Ingenious! But let me tell you something—you can't explain away what I've done by motives any more than I can explain away what you've done. Beyond all your profundities, beyond the Freudian lock you put on every single person's life, there is another world, a larger world, a world of ideology, of politics, of history—a world of things larger than the kitchen table!

In the tirade over Nathan's "psychoanalyzing" of his brother, Henry rebels against many literary and quasi-literary necessities or burdens like "cliche," "stereotype," "motives," "explanation," "fucking thoughts," "predictable," and "depth." Even in conversation and in life, in Henry's opinion, Nathan always attempts to transform him into a character, which again Nathan even admits to himself. As Nathan said in "Basel," "This profession even fucks up grief," but it could just as easily be said that it fucks up family and relationships. The beauty of *The Counterlife* is that the Henry of "Judea" *is* a character, at least from the perspective of another version of Henry in other sections of the book.

In Nathan's letter to Henry aboard the El Al flight back to London in "Aloft," Nathan mentions all the dichotomies he heard spouted while he was a guest of Modercai Lippman's

in Judea. He writes, “Normal/abnormal, strong/weak, we-ness/me-ness, not-so-nice/niceness —there’s one dichotomy missing about which you said little, or nothing: Hebrew/English.” Nathan admits this might be a writer’s fixation, but he “frankly can’t imagine how it wouldn’t occur to anyone, since it’s finally Hebrew more than heroism with which you have surrounded yourself, just as if you went to live forever in Paris it would be French with which you constructed your experience and thought.” Nathan emphasizes so simply the importance of how one constructs their “experience and thought.” For Nathan, language is one of the most crucial aspects of Henry’s transformation. To him, a severance from English is a tool Henry will only feel is gone when he begins “feeling the loss of the language and the society that you look...to be so blindly giving up.”

Nathan believes Henry’s upbringing, along with a very communicative father, could never be associated with a place like Israel. He recalls what he should have said to Rabbi Mordecai Lippman at dinner: “Maybe the Jews begin with Judea, but Henry doesn’t and he never will.” He continues his what-he-should-have-said: “He begins with WJZ and WOR, with double features at the Roosevelt on Saturday afternoons and Sunday doubleheaders at Ruppert Stadium watching the Newark Bears.” While Jews are known for their allegiance to the Book, this upbringing in Newark, with the radio programs and the theater (and, of course, baseball) is not shallow on words and stories itself. 1950s radio dialogues and pre-CGI films were indeed verbal affairs.

In “Gloucestershire,” the entire affair between Nathan and Maria is verbal. Nathan is an impotent seducer. Like Henry’s and Wendy’s affair in “Basel,” his affair with Maria unfolds slowly in sensual, dialogical detail. Nathan says,

I expose myself to her voice as though it were her body, draining from it my every drop of sensual satisfaction. There's to be no exquisite pleasure here that cannot be derived from words. My carnality is now *really* a fiction and, revenge of revenge, language and only language must provide the means for the release of everything. Maria's voice, her talking tongue, is the sole erotic implement. The one-sidedness of our affair is excruciating.

The power of language to create even the intensest love is shown in this section, despite Nathan's ultimate belief that, "Without a sexual bond these things don't last." Maria has her doubts, too: "This endless talk that never reaches a climax has caused two supremely rational people to entertain the most irrational fantasy until finally it's come to seem absurdly tangible." "This disease," she continues, "has distorted everything!" Yet, remarkably, it is later this intense bond made through talk that has led Maria to her freest state of being; it cultivated in her the ability to talk and write to the ghost of Nathan. Moreover, Maria says quite explicitly in this passage how remarkably powerful verbalization is: "endless talk" made an "irrational fantasy" "absurdly tangible." Nathan responds to Maria's call for levelheadedness by telling her that after the surgery they can "conduct a very thorough investigation" of their feelings to see "if it has been nothing more than some overheated verbal infatuation..." Of course, the purest form of eros—sexless love formed out of words—spurs Maria to finally accept Nathan's marriage proposal before that investigation is necessary.

Nathan may have only "fallen in love with is that voice deliciously phrasing its English sentences." He may be the "man who died for the soothing sound of a finely calibrated relative clause." "Caught up entirely in what has come to feel like a purely mythic endeavor, a defiant, dreamlike quest for the self-emancipating act, possessed by an intractable idea of how my existence is to be fulfilled, I now must move beyond the words to the concrete violence of surgery."

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If all of these examples of characters in *The Counterlife* are meek contributors to the thesis that the written word and the mentally sculpted verbal creation are emancipators with the ability to change reality despite being birthed as unreal, the structure of *The Counterlife* is a colossal substantiation.

In the world of “Gloucestershire,” the previous sections of *The Counterlife* are actually fictional manuscripts written by Nathan. Henry is alive and has never left New Jersey. Instead, it is Nathan with the heart issue, not Henry. At Nathan’s funeral, Henry says to himself in shock, “All the while Nathan had been ill, his diversion, his distraction, his entertainment, his amusement, his art, had been the violent disfiguring of me” (TC, 226). “Writing my eulogy!” he thinks disgustedly.

In the beginning of “Gloucestershire,” there is a whiff of a possibility that Henry’s heart problems happened. Nathan says, “I say, like Henry, ‘This is the most difficult thing that I’ve ever had to face,’ and she answers, like the hardhearted cardiologist, ‘You haven’t had a difficult life then, have you?’ ‘All I mean,’ I reply, ‘is that this is a damn shame’” (TC, 183). Perhaps Nathan and his brother share a genetic disposition towards heart problems, and they both required pills. Perhaps the existence of this reference is this: Nathan, in “Gloucestershire,” is narrating the events of his relationship with Maria (which is the only section in *The Counterlife* that is *not* a manuscript). After having earlier wrote a fictional story (“Basel”) in which he transplanted upon a fictional Henry his own heart problems, he now refers to this portion of dialogue in this telling of his own life, showing the “real life” origin



of this cruel rejoinder. This whiff, though, disappears like a smear of rubbing alcohol on a table. Nathan does not continue to refer to other sections of *The Counterlife*.

The fact that “Gloucestershire” is not referred to as another manuscript in *The Counterlife* is strong evidence for its being the “true” version. The fact and the intricate skill of *The Counterlife* is that no section is a give-away for the “real” version. After reading “Gloucestershire,” which references and transforms all other sections of *The Counterlife* into just a novelist’s manuscripts, “Christendom” might possibly *still* be considered a separate fiction, independent of the version referred to in “Gloucestershire.”<sup>4</sup> That is, “Gloucestershire” could ultimately be just another fiction, and “Christendom” the reality.

Every potential foothold as to determine which is the “real” and which is the “fictitious” is pulled away. In Maria’s question-and-answer session that reads like a conversation with a journalist or tabloid reporter, the person asking the questions turns out not to be a person at all; rather, the conversation is an internal talk with Nathan that she imagines. She critiques the veracity of the section to follow, “Christendom,” telling the questioner that the characterizations were exaggerated to the point of near falseness. Speaking to a version of Nathan in her head instead of a real person takes away from the realness of his death, and makes the conversation a playing out of words and possibilities rather than a concrete action.

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<sup>4</sup> For example, in “Gloucestershire,” when Henry is searching his dead brother’s apartment, he finds the “last chapter called ‘Christendom,’” which appeared to be Nathan’s “dream of escape...a pure magical dream of flight—from the father, the fatherland, the disease, flight from the pathetically uninhabited world of his inescapable character. Here Nathan was dreaming about only himself—another self...”

The fact is that “Christendom” is just as much a “reality” as any other section in *The Counterlife*, a fact made possible by its autonomy as a work of fiction placed side-by-side with other works of fiction, as well as many incongruences. Firstly, if Nathan invented the bizarreness of “Basel” and “Judea,” he could make up the bizarreness of “Gloucestershire”—including his own death—and “Christendom.” Secondly, Nathan never died in any of the “manuscripts,” only in “Gloucestershire.” In fact, in Maria’s letter to Nathan in “Christendom,” she alludes to that. She states—then asks: “You weren’t beyond killing your brother, you weren’t beyond killing yourself, or grandiosely amusing yourself on the plane up from Israel by staging a lunatic hijack attempt—what if you decide everything will be more interesting if my daughter steps off the towpath into the river?” (TC, 313). This makes Nathan’s death sound like a fiction, that he is really still alive. The letter at the end of “Christendom” could be a letter to: the ghost of Nathan, the Nathan who still lives downstairs, the Nathan coming home to the English house hoping Maria will still be there.

In Maria’s letter, she writes in reference to the practice of circumcision which they would later argue about either in fiction or in life or both, “What I’m saying is that all the way back on page 73 I saw where you were preparing to take us, and should have got myself up and out before your plane even landed, let alone rushing to the airport to catch you sky-high still on the Holy Land”<sup>5</sup> (TC, 314). Maria could be referring to what her *character* should have done or what *she* should have done in real life. However, since Henry stole the manuscripts of “Basel” and “Judea” from Nathan’s apartment, how could she know this reference? In a passage from the world where Nathan has *died*, and she is even confused then about her own character: “After reading ‘Christendom’...I began to wonder which was

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<sup>5</sup> 1973 was incidentally the year the “Arabs attacked on... Yom Kippur.”

real, the woman in the book or the one I was pretending to be upstairs. Neither of them was particularly ‘me.’” In the final letter to Nathan, he appears to be *alive*, perhaps still the neighbor downstairs: “When I see you now in the lift or down in the foyer collecting your mail, I will pretend...that we have never been anything other than neighbors...” (TC, 318). Maria could be ending her affair with Nathan before the fiction of the manuscript “Christendom” becomes her reality; or, “Christendom” is “real”, and “Gloucestershire” is “false.” If Nathan’s death in “Gloucestershire” was fiction, then so was the conversation Maria has with his “ghost” about it; like that dialogue, the two letters at the end of “Christendom” could just as easily be fiction, while the main story of “Christendom” could be true.

Lastly, the end of the “story” section of “Christendom” and Nathan’s letter to Maria provide another contradiction. When Nathan imagines Maria not being there when he returns, he has a sudden pang of fear: “Imagine Maria gone, my life without all that, imagine no outer life of any meaning, myself completely otherless and reabsorbed within—all the voices once again only mine ventriloquizing, all the conflicts germinated by the tedious old clashing of contradictions within.” It’s quite sad, but then he says snidely:

But forgo the lament (which everyone who’s ever been locked out of anything knows by heart)—what exactly is in that letter? Being Maria’s, it could be interesting. This is a woman who could teach me things. How have I lost her—if I’ve lost her—this contact, this connection to a full and actual outer existence, to a potent, peaceful, happy life? Imagine that. (TC, 311).

The novelist from the beginning, imagining life other than reality—fiction—comes to life. His interest is piqued. He says, “Imagine that.” He perhaps imagines what she might say in a series of paragraph broken lines:

I'm leaving.  
I've left.  
I'm leaving you.  
I'm leaving the book.  
That's it. Of course. The book! She conceives of herself as my fabrication, brands herself a fantasy and cleverly absconds, leaving not just me but a promising novel of cultural warfare barely written but for the happy beginning (TC, 312).

And with these lines, formed possibly in his imagination, Maria's letter begins:

Dear Nathan,  
I'm leaving. I've left. I'm leaving you and I'm leaving the book and I'm taking Phoebe away before anything dreadful happens to her (TC, 312).

Thus, looked at in this way, the letters, which seem so much more likely to be the truth, could be the "imaginary" and the main "story" of "Christendom" the "reality."

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Is "Gloucestershire" Nathan's "Basel?" And is "Christendom" Nathan's "Judea?" The first sections exploring temptations that lead to an end, the second sections exploring temptations that lead to a radically new life? That is a promising premise, if not for the artful snags that can give no assurance. The intra-medium references prohibit assurance.

At the core of *The Counterlife* are basically two sets each composed of two stories<sup>6</sup> each equally believable, each implanted with seeds of doubt as to their veracity. That is a triumph, for writer Philip Roth in itself. In my opinion, he maintains a more thought-provoking narrative in this fractured, self-referential, schizophrenic work than in a conventional storytelling novel. He does so by pedaling back, running forward, and zigzagging several potentialities (potentialities that may have become realities or may still). discordant and similar, opposite and mirroring. His dichotomous braid has the reader

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<sup>6</sup> I say "two sets of two stories" and "not four stories" because I believe that "Basel"/"Judea" and "Gloucesershire"/"Christendom" are more units than individualities. While the death of Henry and Nathan in "Basel" and "Gloucestershire," respectively, provide more examination for people like the women in their lives

unwittingly unraveling knots while forgetting that it's *all* a fiction. More than the yin and yang puzzle is the *The Counterlife's* intentional utilization of this intra-fictional competition that lets it climb on itself towards a higher finale and realization.

One question posed by Maria in *The Counterlife* is certainly pertinent: "How does one know what is real or false with a writer like that? These people aren't fantasists, they're imaginers—it's the difference between a flasher and a stripper. Making you believe what he wanted you to believe was his very reason for being. Maybe his only reason" (TC, 246). However, unlike the writer Nathan in *The Counterlife*, Roth's reason for writing seems not to make the reader believe any one reality, but to see possible "realnesses" in each, to understand that writability and an active literacy are weapons and tools in the human life, past, present, and future.

Could Nathan and Maria not have predicted their problems in real life enough to avoid them? Is identification of a problem, when two people love each other and want to be together, not enough to target that problem for destruction as a destructive device? Is Roth's ending to *The Counterlife* superficial or the essence of maintaining a civilized life and lasting relationship? Nathan tells Henry while in Israel, "Look, I'm all for authenticity, but it can't begin to hold a candle to the human gift for playacting. That may be the only authentic thing that we ever do." At the end of *The Counterlife*, Nathan writes in his letter to Maria:

If there even is a natural being, an irreducible self, it is rather small, I think, and may even be the root of all impersonation—the natural being may be the skill itself, the innate capacity to impersonate. I'm talking about recognizing that one is acutely a performer, rather than swallowing whole the guise of naturalness and pretending that it isn't a performance but you ... There is no you, Maria, any more than there's a me (TC, 321).

Roth's choice to write Zuckerman-as-writer I believe impels the reader to think of Roth-as-writer, as anyone as a writer. Roth does not try to suspend disbelief in *The Counterlife*, at least not indirectly: he maintains a story of a writer viewing the events in his life as potentially harvestable for fiction, but he simultaneously takes the experience of real events and their transformation into fiction, such that the reader thinks about how the primary text may have been transformed itself. Roth lays naked fiction. There is nothing to hide here, but everything to use. Its articulation of multiple worlds and fictions is an something to be exploited and focused on, not to be steered around. For Roth, having his cake and eating it, too, isn't a luxury, but a difficult process necessary to fully realizing—or fabricating—the possibilities of the form.

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In terms of its effect, *The Counterlife* is really interactive. Depending on the mood or the person, the novel could be read differently. In the mood to believe in the power of determining one's future, the form can be read as enabling. In a cynical mood, read as claustrophobic. In the mood for love, read as refreshing. In the mood for reality, read as painfully real. The ambiguity of the novel allows this.

More importantly, in *The Counterlife* Roth really shows not only through stories, but how, through various types of verbalization—like “manuscripts,” mental speeches, internal dialogues, letters, eulogies—real events can grow out of fiction and how fiction can affect real events. In *The Counterlife*, he explores who people who cover-up their realities with fictions or imagine different lives, and ultimately how these fictions become their reality or affect it. Zuckerman thinks to himself, while in amazement of his brother's new life in an

Israeli frontier settlement, “...*the kind of stories that people turn life into, the kind of lives that people turn stories into*” (italics not added). He shows how words *alone* can cause love, break up families, emancipate those who feel trapped, or act as hate incarnated. This book is all about the effects of the verbal; so many of the relationships in the book depend on it.

*The Counterlife* is like “The Garden of Forking Paths,” by Jorge Luis Borges, who writes in that 1941 short story, “In all fictions, each time a man meets diverse alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the work of the impossible-to-disentangle Ts’ui Pen, the character choose— simultaneously—all of them. He *creates*, thereby, ‘several futures,’ several *times*, which themselves proliferate and fork” (Borges 1998: 125). You could say that the example of this writer in this Borges story has his cake and eat it too, and perhaps he does. I think this decision initiates a realization in the reader that a piece of fiction is never certain, never full-proof, unless it is a rigid, righteous old fable, and even then, it is not necessarily binding. Roth in the sense of *The Counterlife* is a provocateur, but not in the sexual sense traditionally ascribed to him. He breaks the boundary of traditional fiction and leaves no virtually no form of his niche of the written craft untouched.

## ***Operation Shylock***

In *Operation Shylock*, Roth gives in fully to the writerly awareness that his text is indeed a text, that he is indeed a force, a public figure; abstractly, he is an idea *exclusive* of the fictions he writes. This is a form of self-consciousness that in *Operation Shylock*, like in *The Counterlife*, allows Roth to explore more of the possibilities of fiction. And he does all this despite writing about a character and world so close, at least *biographically*, to his own, while at the same time, writing a plot ridiculously outlandish. Roth bashes hewn conventional fiction, and overwhelmingly offers *Operation Shylock* over to a self-awareness of himself and the medium of the novel.

Like the many verbalizations in *The Counterlife*, *Operation Shylock* is full of verbal constructions: a continuous literary interview with writer-friend Aharon Appelfeld, journal entries of Leon Klinghoffer<sup>7</sup>, political speeches about the best course for the State of Israel, “The Ten Tenets of Anti-Semites Anonymous”, and an “A-S.A. Workout Tape” titled “Did the Six Million Really Die?” that fills seven pages with transcriptive text.

As a transition point from *The Counterlife*, the writer Philip Roth offers a wise piece of information in *Operation Shylock* to the man impersonating him, who he derisively labels

Pipik:

Five-year-old children may take the stories for real, but by the time you're pushing sixty, deciphering the pathology of story making comes to be just another middle-age specialty. By the time you're pushing sixty, the representations of 'it' *are* 'it.' They're everything. Follow me? (OS, 200)

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<sup>7</sup> The retired Jewish businessman confined to a wheelchair who was killed when he was thrown off a cruise ship by Palestinian Liberation Organization terrorists in 1985.



Like in *The Counterlife*, where fictions are placed beside fictions, in this explanation “Roth” seems to say that the ability of words to ever fully represent a reality is weak at best. That is not to say that words are not strong themselves, but rather that their connection to the object, idea, or person they represent is not correct. In *Operation Shylock*, words have tremendous power despite who is saying them, and words, even long detached from their origin, still continue to have deadly weight.

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For *Operation Shylock*, Roth was a comprehensive intruder into the ostensibly fictitious piece. It is perhaps his most post-modern book. He pulls out all the stops. He interjects himself wholly and successfully, referencing everything that the media has said about him, revealing so many details about his private life that seem likely true. He offers to the page his biographical history, his life with his then-wife Claire Bloom, his friendship with the novelist Aharon Appelfeld, his traumatic experience with the sleep drug Halcion, to name just some of the many details. He writes of the life that the public thinks they know about Roth, be it from a shallow media knowledge to the most in-depth fan of Roth. Roth even makes fun of this in-depth knowledge of him and his work in the character who claims to also be Philip Roth. The other Philip Roth says,

You look at me as though I’m fawning, but it’s the truth—I know your books inside out. I know your life inside out. I could be your biographer. I am your biographer. The insults you’ve put up with, they drive me nuts just on your behalf. *Portnoy’s Complaint*; not even nominated for a National Book Award! The book of the decade and not even *nominated!* (OS, 73).

Here, Roth offers a mirror of his work from a sympathetic perspective. His grievances are aired not by him, but by a Roth devotee. The other Philip offers the praise

and commiseration not of a critic, but of a supporter, of which in reality there are countless. This obsessiveness is likely common to Roth, who ranks among the most awarded living writers in America at the time of the writing of this thesis. Pipik's obsession, for one, offers a glimpse of the celebrity life, adding a component of reality to the outlandishness of this other Philip. Like the details that Roth himself personally emits in the text, this is an example of a reaction that adds a feeling of reality to the text, that the reader is in Roth's world.

In *The Counterlife*, recollective "writer's notes" written by Nathan Zuckerman punctuate the "actual recollected story"—starkly different affairs. Roth juxtaposes "fictitious" novel notes next to "real" novel notes. Here, in *Operation Shylock*, a grounded interview between Roth and the novelist Aharon Appelfeld is interspersed with the "nonsensical, crude, phantasmagorical farce" that is the rest of the book—obviously starkly different affairs. The previous passage is an example of the Roth's use of another verbal formation to influence his own writing, perhaps as well as a way to bring this book closer to the "real" (The excerpts of the conversation between Roth and Appelfeld are truly from an interview between them published in *The New York Times* in 1988.) Because of its derivation from the life of the supposedly real Roth, non-fictional intertextuality helps add veracity, while not necessarily reality, to the account. The book information also does this, albeit in an arguably cheesier way. Roth calls the book "a confession" and says, "For legal reasons, I have had to alter a number of facts in this book" which he has "drawn...from notebook journal" and "...is an accurate account as I am able to give of actual occurrences that I lived through during my middle fifties..." (OS, 13).

In Philip Roth's "Roth" novel *Operation Shylock*, the author places the novel—a device made for fabrication—close to the “reality” of a person, something as small as several hundred pages against something as complex as a person. Put another way, the signifier (Roth) and the signified (his fiction) implode into almost one and the same. The two are perhaps like a parabola that never touches its graph's axis, or perhaps like a child quickly dipping his wormed hook into a lake and then just as quickly yanking it out. Regardless of graph lines or fishing lines, the lines Roth draws, particularly in *Operation Shylock*, are thin, and, at least seemingly, easily crossable.

Midway through the novel, from the start of Section 8's “The Uncontrollability of Real Things” on page 239 until 248, it is hard, to put it simply, to tell what exactly is going on. Is Roth giving up on this novel? Bowing out? Here not only is “Roth's” control of the fictionality of his work exposed, but the notion that it is indeed a written work as well. The struggle of the writer, not just the fabricator comes out. Roth admits several times in *Operation Shylock* the absurdity of the work, calling it into doubt and openly admitting its risibly ludicrous basis. Roth lapses from a first- to third-person description of “the writer,” a grammar he otherwise avoids in *Operation Shylock*. He starts summarizing the “Pipik plot so far,” without any analysis or judgment of it, a way to recapitulate the story down to every last detail. He writes detailedly, as if as a film treatment or summary for a publisher. He writes, sentences like, “This is the plot up to the moment when the writer leaves the woman still dolefully enmeshed in it,” and, “This is the question plaguing the writer as his taxi carries him safely through Jerusalem's western hills and onto the highway for the airport.” The effect is that the story comes across as absurd.

Roth criticizes the text *and* the story of *Operation Shylock* in very writerly ways. He says the plot consists of a “...general implausibility, a total lack of gravity, reliance at too many key points on unlikely coincidence, an absence of inner coherence, and not even the most tenuous evidence of anything resembling a serious meaning or purpose.” He continues his rampage, “The story so far is frivolously plotted, overplotted, for his taste altogether too freakishly plotted, with outlandish events so wildly careening around every corner that there is nowhere for intelligence to establish a foothold and develop a perspective” (OS, 245). Roth continues his dismantling, “As if the look-alike at the story’s storm center isn’t farfetched enough, there is the...fortuitous appearance of Louis B. Smilesburger himself, Borscht Belt *deus ex machina*” (OS, 245). Roth teeters on and weaves narrowly a crisscross between a real-seeming admittance and a traditional story. Regardless of if the real-seeming admittance is actually real is besides the point, because the implication, the showing of the unwritten perspective is enough to contrast the two viewpoints.

It seems as if “Roth” is skirting the line ever so closely to talking about his own despair over the story’s foolishness, while not allowing total outward self-consciousness destroy the conceit. Strangely, he is distracting the reader from the story in favor of an analysis of the writing. He is denigrating the writing and admitting that the unruly character of Pipik has taken control of the story. The thing has become a mess. This “Roth or simulacrum of Roth or simulacrum of a writer—whatever the reader construes it as—makes the written words arguably more important than what they describe, the story. Forget the story, there is a crisis in the land of articulation and formation.

Even on the flip side, where Nathan could simply be describing a bizarre situation in a writer's terms (the way a football player describes the world in sports lingo or the lawyer in legal jargon) the issue of authorial control is emphasized, because, technically, after all, "Roth" here is the author and this book, as elucidated in the end, is his manuscript. Either way, the control of the story is not just lost by the author, but rather thrown away.

However, when Roth, using his own name as a character who is like him in every publicly knowable way, evaluates his own story, he at least provokes the question of difficulty of writing a story. "It would be comforting," he thinks, "... only natural, to assume that in a narrative contest (in the realistic mode) with this impostor, the real writer would easily emerge as inventive champion, scoring overwhelming victories in Sophistication of Means, Subtlety of Effects, Cunningness of Structure, Ironic Complexity, Intellectual Interest, Psychological Credibility, Verbal Precision, and Overall Verisimilitude; but instead the Jerusalem Gold Medal for Vivid Realism has gone to a narrative klutz who takes the cake for wholesale indifference to the traditional criteria for judgment in every category of the competition" (OS, 247). In a way, it seems like Roth is crossing the boundary between the story and the examination of the story from the writer's perspective. Again, the character "Roth" is saying this and not Roth himself, but this passage, in my opinion, could be construed as a judgment of his job handling the book up until this point. The idea that its "Pipik's story," that "Roth" is "not writing this thing," that "they are," and that he doesn't "even exist" could be construed as kind of authorial failure (OS, 155). Except that "Roth" is reactivated by an anti-Semitic comic and comes back to reign in the unruly literary cowboy and form the story the rest of this story properly.

I believe that Roth, in a subtle way, admits not only the imaginary fictitiousness of his text, but its written-ness. He drives the meaningfulness of the story as a character and its stylistic structure as a writer. Perhaps this is part of what it is to be a writer-narrator, to insert yourself into your fiction, without some of the buffers that come from writing a “purer” fiction. Roth’s writing is messy. He is not the only writer who focuses attention on the process of writing, on the discrepancies not between real and fake, but between fake and fake, and can turn that into a compelling, interesting juxtaposition.

Arguably, Roth is playing with what Pipik would call a “dissimulation, two-facedness, a secretiveness.” Is the reader to believe that Roth divulges the real Roth onto the pages in *Operation Shylock*, even despite that name being doubly emphasized? And why is it doubly emphasized? Because Roth not only reveals presumably real and private information about his life, but the plot of *Operation Shylock* involves a “fake” Philip Roth. Roth hence in the book makes the distinction between the two, calling himself the “real” Philip. Roth hence accentuates, before the reader’s proverbial and literal eyes, a trick of distraction, part of his Rothian legerdemain of who really is this man who writes books in Connecticut? The reader suddenly takes for granted more of what he says about himself because it is being compared with an obvious false version. If Roth had presented a straightly “real” narrative, perhaps the reader would be more likely to scrutinize the account for accuracy. As Pipik says, “So convincing one way—just like you when you write—and then, the next moment, someone will walk out of the room, they’ll turn around and be just the opposite.” Is Roth convincing the reader as he writes, while when he walks out of the room he is someone different? Regardless of the answer, what is his reason in provoking this question in the first place? Roth wants make the writer a thing unto itself, to encapsulate himself fully,

hermetically sealed, as an entity alone in a dark galaxy. Roth is writing himself into a corner radically. He is painting himself in his ostensibly fullest, most detailed image.

Can the reader trust this giving, revealing narrator, a narrator eponymous to the name of the writer on the cover of the book? Can it really be imagined that Roth is writing autofiction? Roth writes voyeuristically fun details about his life inside of a bizarre, unbelievable plot. The biographical, presumably true facts are up for grabs as items of truth or falseness *without* the fantastical story, but with them they are now under the same veil of fictitiousness as the rest. Except that may also be false. The biographical statements that Roth knocks could actually be all the more real-seeming because of the outlandish of the plot. More happening, less focus. Magician Technique 101.

In a sense, Roth is excessively “informing” on himself—on his most private problems, like his battle for his sanity with Halcion, his feelings towards his emotionally-stunted cousin, and his blunt thoughts about his dead wife. Pipik says of the Arabs: “They don’t think that other people have to know what is really on their minds;” however, Jews tell “everything that’s on their minds to everyone nonstop.”<sup>8</sup> Is Roth collaborating with the reading public, with his prestige as a writer, with his chances of the Nobel Prize when he writes the dirt about himself in a fictitious format and not in a memoir? Pipik says, “You really should not be so quick to slit the throats of your collaborators when collaborating is one of your society’s most estimable achievements.” Definitely it is true that Roth has won some of the English-speaking world’s most estimable achievements.

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<sup>8</sup> Reminiscent of how Carol is described when delivering the eulogy of Henry in *The Counterlife*: “Many people wouldn’t have felt the same need that she did to be open and honest about something so personal.”

Of course, Roth writes about the sacrifices he has submitted as a result of the writerly life. His personal disclosures partially make his fiction what it is. He has made his career through his collaborative efforts with the novel and a public interested enough to read them, efforts to strip himself down, to analyze himself free of neuroses or to understand himself. “Amazing,” the character Philip Roth says, “that something as tiny, really, as a self should contain contending subselves—and that these subselves should themselves be constructed of subselves, and on and on and on” (OS, ). Roth has deconstructed his subselves and his personas as a career, his public persona and his presumably private self and how they influence one the other. Roth has collaborated with his selves, even if its his public persona conversing with his fictional persona. A collaborative effort to birth fundamental truths. As the novelist Porochista Khapour says, few writers have mined themselves as a subject as much as Philip Roth.<sup>9</sup>

Many writers use their own experiences to inform their work, but, when he uses his own name in the work, Roth utilizes fewer pretenses than a more traditional novelist using a patently fictional character. If he uses his name as a character, he is still using his *own* name, and this automatically is a factor in the story, no matter if the nearly biographically identical writer Philip Roth in *Operation Shylock* is different from the real, real Philip Roth who lives in. What Roth purports in the following excerpt from his *Paris Review* interview, and which coincides with his frequent devaluation of the fantastical for the close-to-home, is a focus on the irrelevance of his subject matter in favor of an analysis closely and innovatively of the subject:

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<sup>9</sup> Khapour, Porochista. Personal conversation. February 17, 2015.



As you well know, the intriguing biographical issue—and critical issue, for that matter— isn't that a writer will write about some of what has happened to him, but *how* he writes about it, which, when understood properly, takes us a long way to understanding *why* he writes about it. A more intriguing question is why and how he writes about what hasn't happened—how he feeds what's hypothetical or imagined into what's inspired and controlled by recollection, and how what's recollected spawns the overall fantasy (Paris Review, No. 84).

It seems Roth wants to showcase a thinner line between himself and his fiction. There is a long passage in *Operation Shylock* where Roth does this. In a scene where Roth explains his revulsion of and competition with Pipik, as well as his wish to transcend their unsought after relationship, Roth weaves in between the written and the unwritten worlds—not because he relays information that is provably truthful, because that is impossible, but because he actually gives into a discussion about writing, and a discussion about writing quite similar to what could be called the critical pitfalls of his novel up until that point.

## Conclusion

By employing writer as narrator, including himself, Roth can come to know better the differences between the written and unwritten worlds. It is a simple technique for a difficult enterprise. Use like for like. The best answer to question is to use the same currency, the same denomination. As Pipik virulently says to Roth, “Subtraction is one of the four fundamental operations of arithmetic. Let me refresh your recollection. It is the inverse of addition. The result of subtracting one number from another is called the difference. The symbol for this operation is our friend the minus sign. Any of this ring a bell? As in addition, only like qualities can be subtracted. Dollars from dollars, for instance, work very nicely. Dollars from dollars, Phil, is what subtraction was made for.” There is a surprisingly elegant efficacy to inserting as a Virgil to explore the dynamic relationship of the written and the unwritten a writer.

In the case of *Operation Shylock*, using as narrator who is a writer as good as Philip Roth—because that narrator is supposed to be “Philip Roth”—he can do this, and that is perhaps another iteration perhaps one possible reason why Philip Roth chose to use the character “Philip Roth.”

In *Operation Shylock*, Roth has transformed the idea of “authorial presence.” In no way is it a problem to be steered away from, but rather Roth’s authorial insertions are one of the defining, masterful parts of his fiction. Henry James, an author whose works critics and Roth himself compare to Roth’s early work like *Letting Go* (1962) and *When She Was Good* (1967), had an interest in realism that never led the novelist of this project to the “notion that all signs of the author’s presence are inartistic.” However, in Roth’s Zuckerman and

particularly “Roth” books, the author actually made his presence a signature of exacting artistry, rather than an instrument to be merely avoided as potentially “inartistic.” If James’s “interest is not negative—how to get rid of the author—but positive: how to achieve an illusion of reality, including the complexities of mental and moral reality,” Roth’s interest is *vastly* positive: his presence is not an unavoidable concession or even a witty conceit of a fiction writer to his or her novel as part of a larger narrative, but rather, in many of his books, the entire construct of his narrative. Roth unabashedly traverses between the supposed written and the unwritten without a reservation as to whether that breaks the rules of fiction. It is one thing to incorporate the “writer” into a work of fiction; it is another to make the written life the exploration itself. Roth does not feign that exploration of the self is only achievable via the “realistic” facade of ordinariness. His fiction amazingly yields no fewer results than a narrative which purports, through one means or another, a knowledge of the life beyond the cloistered existence of the writer and behind the keyboard. He exploits his writerliness, not buries it.

Roth’s technique and subject of writing about writing and writers is, actually, just as taboo as his writings about sex, religion, or death. An introductory creative writing teacher, for instance, might prohibit “writing about writing” as a copout. For the novice fiction writer, metafictional self-consciousness is a rookie, even “lazy” move; a metafictional self-consciousness is deemed a hurdle before reaching one’s “real” subject. A most basic example of this type is a story that begins with a writer faced by a blank computer screen, halted by “writer’s block.”

“Writing about writing” is dangerous for a writer because it approaches on one side a superficially pleasing meta-ness and on the other gimmickry. Too simple or too daunting, Roth’s choice encounters a field of possible pitfalls: itself self-limiting, paralyzing, a hall-of-mirrors effect, not “escapist,” but not “realistic” either. It might be excessively self-referential, making it a brain exercise for the reader, or come across as a flashy intellectual demonstration instead of a purposeful route to a meaningful destination. A ludicrously obvious self-portrait or an artfully concocted persona? Perhaps the answer is a skilled interplay of the two: straight man, funny man; real man, imaginary man, but almost always caricature, caricature. Because no matter what character it is in *The Counterlife* and *Operation Sbylock*, and I believe Philip Roth would be the first to admit it, the straight man is just as fake as the funny man. There are no “real” characters in either of these books, and Roth’s manipulations of fiction

There are infinitely many reasons why most novels look through the eyes of non-writer narrators; there are less reasons, however, why they should look through the eyes of an author. For a regular non-writer narrator, the possibilities are endless, juicy, and rich: the extended metaphors available (for example, life as the idealization of a house for an architect...), the host of surrounding characters gettable (...the engineer who actualizes and limits, the painter who covers up, the builder who takes too long), or the symbolisms ready to be plucked (...nails as spikes that ultimately build).

Conventional professions for narrators are as common as they are diverse: a fisherman, a baseball player, a puppeteer, a homemaker, a professor, a criminal, a detective, an actor, a painter, an inventor. So are different types: a lothario, an addict, a failure, a

fantasist, an apostate, a historical figment, an attitude embodied, a stereotype, a comical type, an idiosyncratic type. In his career, Roth has indeed used many writer characters: for examples, a puppeteer in *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), a baseball player in *The Great American Novel* (1973), a lothario and/or professor in many<sup>10</sup>. And of course, the characters that populate Roth's novels are always complex and not exclusive to one of these categorizations. Even when the narrator is a writer, he is, like any good character or any real human being, multifaceted. The point, however, is that out of the infinity of narrators, Roth has steadfastly returned to his writer. Some authors recur detectives, Roth revisits the novelist.

Dangerously, though, Roth most signature move is to write, either in *The Counterlife* or *Operation Shylock*, from the perspective of a writer. The benefits of the choice are almost unwieldily powerful because a writer can comment, interact, or play with the very aspects of the medium which the reader is holding: the bound book constructed of glue, paper, page numbers, Library of Congress cataloging information, copyright data, sometimes string in the case of hardbacks. Writers are, literally, the masters of the form *in hand*. This type of writerly novel does maintains promise for a well-deserved intra-medium connectivity in a form of writing often unsure about its own existence.

Roth in this sense is a provocateur not in the sexual sense, but in the writerly sense. His technique and subject of writing about the written, the fictional, and, most generally, the verbal is actually just as taboo as his writings about sex, religion, or death (although his verbal taboo cracking complements the latter). I would roughly compare it to the abolition of the fourth wall in theater, except in Roth's case, it is not really the fourth wall he takes

down in *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock*, but rather something like a ceiling and the roof.

Perhaps Aharon's answer to one of Roth's questions in *Operation Shylock* can give one possible reason why Roth, a writer who has often written so seemingly close to the "real," has never given in totally to it, into what is today called "autofiction." Appelfeld says:

I tried several times to write "the story of my life"...But all my efforts were in vain. I wanted to be faithful to reality and to what really happened. But the chronicle that emerged proved to be a weak scaffolding. The result was rather meager, an unconvincing imaginary tale. The things that are most true are easily falsified (OS, 86).

Undoubtedly, at least in my opinion, fiction has benefits vaster than attempts at "true" on the self can ever achieve; however, it has often been, for many writers, a limiting hew of the fiction medium to transcend itself fully, perhaps because it—its writers, that is, have been afraid of its own self-perceived restrictions. "Fiction" cannot look in the mirror without being frightened of itself. It cannot inspect itself too closely without becoming invisible to itself.

Roth's choice of narrator is daring because it pits a writer seemingly as close to a story as possible without falling into autobiography, autofiction, or just non-fiction. In *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock*, he goes to the far edges of fiction, and makes a home there. More than that, he breaches those borders, and reveals new lands. Writing like he does is a sort of one-to-one writer-novel ratio that ups the stakes for technique and function. Roth, by writing about himself fictionally with loads of personal details, makes himself much more vulnerable than if he were writing about, say, a fisherman from Nebraska named Thomas, but because of his decision to do the the former, he also has new tools and can build higher

with them, than if he were writing about a fisherman from Nebraska named Thomas. Roth matches fire with fire. With it, he forges exceptional creations.

Facing off a novel and a novel-writing narrator requires virtues: courage, restraint, reason. Roth is: courageous because his choice is easily fallible; restrained because he maintains a course or purpose on top of “merely” mathematical examination of different metaphysical dimensions; and rational because his decision to employ a writer-narrator above all has been too consistently focused to suppose an objective other than purely intentional. Roth did not put the cart before the horse with the Zuckerman and “Roth” novels. They are not happy accidents, and they are not one-offs. Positively, they are sustained, extremely deliberate explorations through Roth has decided that a writer-narrator is the best way to investigate. His *sjuzbet* is a legerdemain with a very skewed and dynamic series of emphases, de-emphases. He emphasizes the presentation by the narrator, and how that narrator interacts with the story, over the story itself. That is how most fiction works: the narrator interacts with the story, simple enough. But Roth

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When Henry has his breakdown in *The Counterlife*, he sees words: When his wife Carol asks him what’s wrong, he replied blankly with the words, “It’s staring me right in the face.” “What is?” ...Tell me, darling, and we’ll talk about it. What is staring you right in the face?”, she asked. “The words,’ he angrily told her, ‘the words ‘it’s staring you right in the face!’”

When Nathan has his breakdown in Operation Shylock, and his “mind began to disintegrate,” the “word DISINTEGRATION seemed itself to be the matter” out of which his brain was constituted.” They “began spontaneously coming apart,” and the “fourteen

letters, big, chunky, irregularly sized components of my brain, elaborately intertwined, tore jaggedly loose from one another, sometimes a fragment of a letter at a time, but usually in painfully unpronounceable nonsyllabic segments of two or three, their edges roughly serrated.”

The characters and their lives in *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock*, examples of a Zuckerman novel and a “Roth” novel, respectively, are heavily affected by words and more generally by the verbal—in these two cases of characters’ breakdowns, literally. Furthermore, Roth exposes the written as a form that is forever independent of anything else. Roth’s method to make these effects is to place the written over the imaginary, employing a writer-narrator and by intentionally exposing the fictional world for what it is: fiction. In doing so, Roth opens the possibilities of the medium, eliminates the idea of its fragility, and hence robustly, vigorously exercises it. His results are numerous, but mostly that a relationship with the author, even if it is itself feigned, can enhance the written work.

Roth’s work investigates the differences between the written and the unwritten, the real and the supposed, the unfortunate and the hoped for, the potential for greatness and the outcome of failure, possibility and finality. Roth uses the novel to undo finality. With it, he shows other possible worlds and the self-madness of both inner and outer lives. Roth hits against both predestination and free will. The human mind is an inventive apparatus just like a writer’s. It decides its future, examines its past, and manages the best it can with its present. It scrutinizes, contemplates, and fantasizes about the lives of others.

The question Roth perpetually faces is whether he paints the man in the mirror or the man others paint him to be. The warped, incorrect image from the public mirror is, I



think, a closer description. Roth has painted image after image of a life collected by experiences produced behind a keyboard and refracted back to him. His conscientiousness of this could not be keener or more excited by its possibilities.

The quality of Roth's writing alone carries him to reality: even in his most outlandish scenes or constructs, a mundaneness remains. Roth's fiction is never fantastical, even when it is implausible, and it is not slapstick, even when it is ridiculous. Roth hews the edge of a realistic genre by always aiming his works at the target of purposeful discovery, even if it comes in ostensibly roundabout ways. Despite its fantasy, Roth's works is grounded, human, physics-abiding, and skeptical, as well as conscious of its own existence. Though he might have agreed with Ford Madox Ford that the reader should feel that he has been 'really there,' he would never have suggested that the reader must entirely forget the guiding presence of the author. (50).<sup>11</sup>

The recent literary phenomenon Karl Ove Knausgaard has apparently redefined the literary world with his new auto fiction, a hybrid between autobiography and fiction. In a recent review of his latest installment of his 3,500 page, six book series, Jeffrey Eugenides wrote, "He doesn't lie or make things up (so far as I know). But the selection process he subjects his memories to in order to fulfill the narrative demands of his writing rises to a level of considerable artifice. His raw materials are more authentic (maybe), but the products they create no less artful. Knausgaard has found a way to suspend the reader's disbelief at a time when that suspension is harder to accomplish. His technique is so cunning that the reader doesn't even notice" (Eugenides). Philip Roth found a way to un-

suspend his reader's disbelief, to disrupt it, to exploit it, all in the medium of fiction, and hence found truths that neither a fable nor an autobiography could deliver.

The verbal life affects us all. Life happening is unwritten, but most of life acted upon is written—usually in our minds, sometimes on paper. What people say effects us, what we say effects others. It effects our own future. How we curate sentences and choose words makes for an infinity of outcomes. To put it simply, verbal formations form us. We all strive to control our lives, and the writer Philip Roth is no different. He is one of the best examples of one who articulates and alters, transforming life into words which can reflect back to us more strongly than the original event, or can impregnate, and if nurtured properly, give birth to newness.

No art besides the written can claim verb tenses. Words have. Words do. Words will. They define and redefine the past, present, and future many times over again. Among all of Roth's triumphs in his fictions, one is in exposing the possibilities and powers of the the verbal within the medium, and using it is as the device that it can be, not just a recording of stories, even good stories, but an element and an art unto itself. He has innovated processes of morphing texts; he has explored transformation comically and cruelly in character and content, and with genius in form. He allowed himself to recognize that what is put into words can be pliable, and is always forceful: a fiction writer *par excellence*, contending not only with the course of a single star, but with its force within the universe. No matter how painful his subject matter can sometimes be, he appears, from the two fine representations from his writer-narrator novels discussed here, a proponent of free will rather than predestination, of creativity rather than passivity, and overall, of agency.

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