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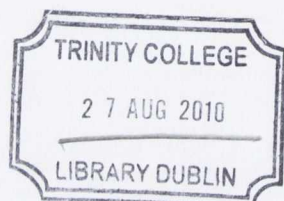
UNIVERSITY OF DUBLIN TRINITY COLLEGE

The “walking text”: Narrativised Identities in the Work of Philip Roth

A Thesis submitted to
the School of English at the University of Dublin, Trinity College, in
fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By Leeanne Quinn

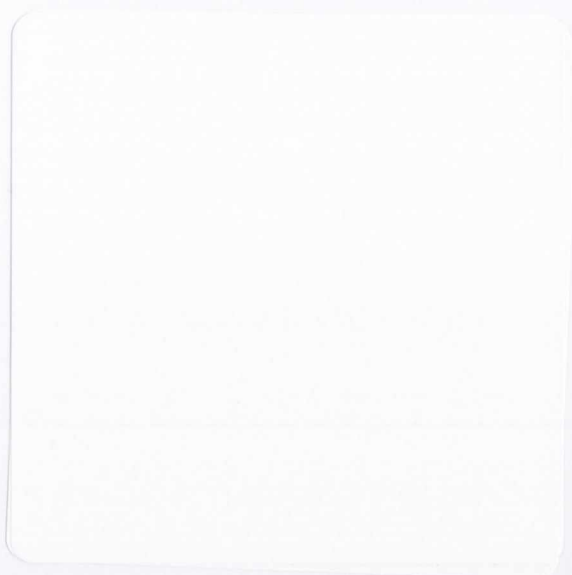
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Summary

The introduction to this thesis makes clear the need for a reconsideration of Roth's representation of self-identity through an examination of how selfhood and self-identity are represented and experienced through narrative. The introduction defines several of the key terms through which this thesis operates and explains how its methodology privileges a reading of Roth that is character-orientated, taking its understanding of a character's narrativised experience from the theories of Paul John Eakin, whose theories of autobiography and self-identity are drawn upon where appropriate throughout the thesis.

Chapter One is a pivotal chapter of this thesis. It places emphasis on reading Roth's engagement with "autobiography" as a sustained enquiry into the modes of representation available to the writer. It reassesses Roth's position as a writer who frequently engages with concepts of autobiography; moving beyond reductive critical readings. The chapter illustrates Roth's engagement with the conflicts inherent to the term "autobiography" and the difficulties implicit in any attempt to limit self-representation to the binary of true (autobiography) or false (fiction).

Chapter Two draws on themes introduced in the first chapter by considering two of Roth's most complex engagements with self-representation. This chapter demonstrates how the "Philip" and "Philip Roth" protagonists of *Deception: a Novel* and *Operation Shylock: a Confession* significantly expand the scope of Roth's enquiry into the inter-dependent relationship between fact and fiction in narrative. Focusing on the protagonists' tendencies towards self-invention and improvisation through narrative, acts that *amalgamate* truth and fiction, this chapter forwards impersonation as a vital component to the representation of identity in Roth's writings. Impersonation is suggested as a valid alternative to the stringent distinctions between fact and fiction shown to be insufficient and restrictive in chapter one.

Chapter Three develops significantly on the concepts introduced in the previous two chapters by applying the concepts of impersonation, improvisation, and self-invention, to in-depth readings of *Sabbath's Theater* and *American Pastoral*. *Sabbath's Theater* focuses predominantly on the character of Sabbath and his nihilistic, radically self-improvising narrativised identities. The character of Sabbath is explored through the same methodologies applied to the protagonists of the American Trilogy; thus seeking to position him as an enabler to the individuals within the

trilogy. The analysis of *American Pastoral* focuses on the characters of Swede, Dawn, and Merry Levov. These characters are appraised in relation to how they appropriate and negotiate their selves through sustained, narrativised self-inventions. The role of Nathan Zuckerman as narrator to these events is also assessed.

Chapter Four moves to an analysis of *I Married a Communist* and *The Human Stain*. *I Married a Communist* focuses on the characters of Ira Ringold and Eve Frame as they negotiate their identities in a period of history primarily defined by betrayal. The theme of betrayal is explored in relation to the implications it has for the characters concerned; together with a further analysis of the implication it has to Zuckerman as writer of the novel. *The Human Stain* is examined in terms of Coleman Silk's radical act of self-reinvention through his racial passing. The analysis centres on the key concepts of this thesis, of Coleman's identity as a "walking text" that rewrites its own subjectivity. Delphine Roux, Faunia Farley, and Les Farley are assessed in relation to the scripting of their respective self-identities. Zuckerman's role as narrator in this closing novel of the trilogy also receives further analysis.

Chapter Five moves to discuss the shorter works that follow the American Trilogy; texts united structurally through Roth's employment of the shorter form, and thematically through their concern with the dying, ageing or diminished self. This chapter begins with an exploration of Roth's previous engagements with representations of the injured or transformed corporeal self subsequently moving to evaluate the interconnections made between body, memory, and the status of the ageing corporeal self within these later fictions. The relationship between narrative and self-identity expanded on throughout this thesis turns to the significant impact the deteriorating body has on the individual's self-narrative.

The conclusion brings together the central arguments of this thesis. It illustrates how the reconsideration of the centrality of narrativised identities demonstrated throughout this thesis works to reassess previous critical readings of Roth, of Roth's characters, of *Sabbath's Theater*, and of the American Trilogy. It gestures towards the future of Roth's writings, and by association Roth scholarship, in anticipation of his forthcoming two novels.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my most sincere thanks to my supervisor Prof. Stephen Matterson for his support and guidance. Indeed, were it not for his encouragement and suggestions, I would not have had the opportunity to explore Roth through the avenue pursued in this thesis.

I would like to thank my parents Matt and Betty, for their continual reassurance and encouragement throughout the writing of this thesis. Lastly, I would like to express special thanks to my friends who have been continual pillars of support over the years, in particular Siobhán, Karen, and Sinéad.

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ABBREVIATIONS

TITLES OF ROTH'S WORKS

AL	<i>The Anatomy Lesson</i>
AP	<i>American Pastoral</i>
TB	<i>The Breast</i>
TC	<i>The Counterlife</i>
D	<i>Deception</i>
TDA	<i>The Dying Animal</i>
E	<i>Everyman</i>
EG	<i>Exit Ghost</i>
TF	<i>The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography</i>
GC	<i>Goodbye, Columbus</i>
HS	<i>The Human Stain</i>
IMAC	<i>I Married A Communist</i>
IND	<i>Indignation</i>
MLAM	<i>My Life As A Man</i>
OS	<i>Operation Shylock: A Confession</i>
PTS	<i>Patrimony: A True Story</i>
PC	<i>Portnoy's Complaint</i>
POD	<i>The Professor of Desire</i>
RMAO	<i>Reading Myself and Others</i>
ST	<i>Sabbath's Theatre</i>

Introduction

You are not an autobiographer, you're a personificator [...] You've written metamorphoses of yourself so many times, you no longer have any idea what you are or ever were. By now what you are is a walking text.¹

This thesis argues for a reconsideration of Philip Roth's representations of self-identity through a reading of his work that asserts the pervasive centrality of the concept of narrativised selves to Roth's oeuvre. It does this by tracing a trajectory that presents his representation of selfhood as a career-long effort to engage with the concept of how selfhood and self-identity relate to, are represented, and are experienced, through narrative. This thesis moves beyond the reductive and frequently confining approaches that have prevailed in the reception and subsequent critical analysis of Roth's fiction by identifying such attitudes as limited misreadings that situate Roth's employment of autobiography in relation to his fictional characters as a negative, repetitive, and narcissistic aspect of his work. Such critical approaches fail to engage with the full complexity of Roth's narrativised selves. This thesis instead focuses on an examination of self-identity that does not distinguish between the modes of self-representation, or narrativised selves, identifiable in writings categorisable as "autobiographical" or "pseudo-autobiographical", and those that are explicitly labelled as "fictional". Through such a reading of Roth's writings this thesis argues that his exploration of the relationship between self-identity and narrative is a concerted and engaged effort to present and re-present the fluid nature of self-identity, and explores how this relates to and impacts upon his characters. By focusing attention on the centrality of the narrativised self within Roth's oeuvre this thesis posits narrative as the key component to the experience, manipulation, and improvisation, of self-identity; a component that is vital to how Roth's "fictional" characters inhabit their subjectivities within Roth's writings.

Roth's career can be identified as a continuous and continuing engagement with exploring the narrative modes available to the writer in order to represent consciousness in a way that reflects the complexity and diversity of human

¹ Philip Roth, *The Facts: a Novelist's Autobiography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988; London: Vintage, 1997), 162.

experience. Roth himself identifies this as the obsessional theme of his writings. He describes his work as “a *large* effort of realism, over 30 years, about consciousness and self-consciousness.”² This theme has remained at the core of Roth’s engagement with consciousness over the course of five decades now. The release of *The Humbling* in November 2009 brings Roth’s oeuvre, together with this fifty-year-long engagement with self-consciousness through narrative, to a total of thirty books. However, in terms of an analysis of Roth’s concerted efforts to engage with the nature of self-consciousness, it must first be noted that critical analysis of his writings has tended to undermine the importance of this obsession and the implications it should necessarily have on any consideration of Roth’s writings and characters. Castigated by Irving Howe in his 1972 reconsideration of Roth’s early novels, Roth has struggled to escape the early labels that diminish and detract from the interrogative and boundlessly pervasive complexity of his writings. Howe accused Roth of “literary narcissism” and famously suggested that his narratives amount to a “spilling-out of the narrator which it becomes hard to suppose is not also a spilling-out of the author”³. The substance of Howe’s attack, while now noted for its vitriol obstinacy and short-sightedness, nevertheless continually resurfaces in contemporary reviews of Roth’s writings. This thesis draws on such reviews throughout in order to illustrate the misconceptions that have consistently arisen from Roth’s contemporaneous reception and demonstrate that when considered through the lens of “narrativised selves”, Roth’s writings eschew such detrimental classifications.

The most significant development in contemporary Roth scholarship has been Debra Shostak’s *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives*, published in 2004. It is necessary to outline the several areas in which this thesis differs from Shostak’s work throughout this introduction in order to register the vital contribution this thesis makes to this emergent phase in Roth criticism. Shostak’s reading of Roth, like numerous critical approaches to Roth, places emphasis on representations of Jewish identity. This thesis seeks in contrast to move beyond ethnocentric readings of Roth as such readings are already abundant among Roth

² Philip Roth, quoted in Hermione Lee “‘Life Is And’: Philip Roth in 1990”, *Conversations with Philip Roth*, Georges J. Searles ed., (Jackson: Mississippi University Press, 1992), 265.

³ Irving Howe, “Philip Roth Reconsidered”, *Commentary*, December 1972, 69-77.

<<http://www.commentarymagazine.com/viewarticle.cfm/philip-roth-reconsidered-5156>> [accessed July 2008]

scholarship. Having continually been privileged by Roth critics they remain the primary, if somewhat tired, mode through which Roth is received, accessed, and read. That is not to say that Jewish identity will not be addressed at certain points throughout the thesis where such an analysis proves fruitful, but Jewish ethnicity will not be the presiding critical viewpoint through which these texts are approached. Shostak's approach to Roth is through the concept of the "countertext" and operates through a Bakhtinian reading through which she forwards her thesis that:

The books talk to one another as countertexts in an ongoing and mutually illuminating conversation, zigzagging from one way of representing the problems of selfhood to another, often by conceiving of such representations in terms of oppositions and displacements—of attitude, or belief, or character type, or genre, or tone.⁴

It forwards the argument that "Roth's dialogical method offers a constant source of self-critique"⁵ and that is is Roth's "compulsion to contradict and counterimagine [that] drives the logic within each narrative as well as the juxtaposition of one novel to the next".⁶ Shostak's work is a welcome addition to the rapidly increasing scholarly attention Roth's work is currently receiving and her critical study, along with those of other prominent Roth scholars are referred to throughout this thesis where appropriate. However, Shostak's intertextual approach detracts from the concerns of the characters as they exist within the individual texts. Indeed Shostak's tendency towards theoretical formulae, while illuminating in its concerns with Roth's intertextuality, often reduces character to the role of subset (note her use of the term "logic" in the previous quotation) in its efforts to illustrate the countertextual Roth: "Roth's *strategy* allows him from book to book and even within a single book to take up a variety of perspectives on the issues that engross him."⁷ (emphasis added).

This thesis provides an alternative reading through its focus on representations of self-identity that privilege character over intertextuality and refer to issues of intertextuality only when it directly relates to an individual character's

⁴ Debra Shostak, *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives* (South Carolina:University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

experience of self-identity within a particular work, as is the case in Chapter Two's discussion of *Deception*. Rather than mould the texts into an overarching theoretical perspective that marginalises the characters, the character-orientated approach adopted by this thesis must necessarily adapt itself to the respective texts it considers and consequently to the characters that inhabit these texts. This approach is reflected in the structure of this thesis which analyses each text through sectional breakdowns largely focusing on character, specific aspects of a character, or indeed thematic concepts that illuminate a character, or several characters, within a given text. Shostak's perspective is predominantly inter and counter-textual and this thesis will seek rather to explore the centrality of narrative as it relates to the *individual* throughout the *individual* works it examines. This approach forces a subsequent reconsideration of Roth, not as a writer whose "methods offer a constant source of self-critique" but rather as a writer deeply concerned with the individual, with consciousness, and consequently with the representation of narrativised selves forwarded throughout this thesis.

In tracing, as this thesis does, a trajectory of analysis that is loosely chronological, emphasis is placed on Roth's insistent return to narrativised selves throughout his career not as a means of "self-critique" or because of a "compulsion to contradict", readings that in their theoretical approach de-personalise Roth's engagement with character, but as a concerted effort to explore how selfhood and self-identity are represented and experienced through narrative. Each chapter of the thesis will variously engage with the key protagonists of each respective text, examining how they engage with and sustain themselves through narrative, as selves that attempt to live within and through self-sustaining narratives; a mode of experiencing subjectivity that, to use Paul John Eakin's term, can be referred to as "living autobiographically"⁸. The study of Roth's self-sustaining narratives within this thesis proceeds through a concerted effort to engage Roth *through* Roth, to approach, by means of sensitive and character orientated readings, the individual texts in order to best illustrate the illuminating significance this lends to an engagement with Roth's represented selves as "walking texts."

This thesis operates on the central premise that the characters within the writings of Philip Roth experience and manipulate their subjectivity in line with, or

⁸ Paul John Eakin, *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2008)

against, pre-established and culturally sanctioned narratives in their efforts to sustain their identities through self-improvised narratives. In this way they merit the term “walking text” because their mode of living is one in which they live “autobiographically”. In her introduction to *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives*, Shostak gestures towards a reading of character that works as an apt summation of the pre-established critical readings of character in Roth that this thesis seeks to move beyond in order to forward the study of narrativised selves into what this thesis hopes will be a new and pivotal phase in Roth studies. Shostak states that:

Characters talk to themselves to learn who they are, what they think, what multiple positions they occupy, and how they are trapped within their own self-consciousness. And characters talk to each other in order to tease out as convincingly as possible the many positions on a given subject matter.⁹

This reading of character, of the relationship that exists between a character and their experiences of self-identity, is presented and subsequently analysed by Shostak as self-reflexive; as though the individual is in some way distanced from his or her characteristics, his or her personality or personal experiences of identity. This thesis instead aligns its readings of the experience of subjectivity with Paul John Eakin’s theories of autobiography and the construction of self-identity through narrative.

Eakin, the foremost contemporary theorist of autobiography and narrative identity, innovatively explores the interrelationship between narrative and self-identity. Whereas Shostak positions character within conventions of critical analysis that create a distinction between the character, that is to say, the identity, and their *experiences* of identity within Roth’s narratives, Eakin, in contrast, argues against an understanding of identity that segregates the individual from their narrative:

The very phrase ‘talking about/ourselves’ tends to separate selfhood from the act of expressing it, to attribute an independent existence to the ‘ourselves’ we would be ‘talking about,’ whereas the ‘talking,’ I argue, actually calls our narrative identities into being; there is a mutually enhancing interplay between what we are and what we say we are. In speaking of *narrative identity* [...] I propose [...] an extremely close and dynamic relation between narrative and identity, for narrative is not only a literary form but part of the fabric of our

⁹ Shostak, *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives*, 3.

lived experience. When it comes to our identities, narrative is not merely *about* self, but rather in some profound way a constituent part *of* self.¹⁰

Through Eakin's understanding of narrative as a concept that is not only integral to the self but also constitutes the self, this thesis will forward a reading of the "walking texts" within Roth's fictions as exemplary examples of such narrativised subjectivities. As a result, the act of "autobiography" will, as we proceed through the thesis, be taken out of its literary context and instead viewed as yet another mode of living that is narrative dependent and through which self-identity is constructed.

The structure of this thesis is, as stated previously, based on a loosely chronological trajectory that spans from Roth's 1974 novel *My Life as a Man*, through to *Indignation*, released in 2008. It covers thirteen novels from within this period. This thesis, however, will also move freely, where necessary, to reference works outside of the core texts examined, as such references enhance and further illuminate my argument throughout the thesis. For example, the stories contained within *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959) will be referred to in Chapters Two, Three, and Five while David Kepesh's mammary metamorphosis in *The Breast* (1979) will make an appearance in our discussion of the body in Chapter Five.

Chapters One and Two are pivotal chapters to this thesis through their analysis of Roth's engagement with modes of writing categorisable as "autobiographical", those categorisable as "fiction", and how these two modes of representation impact upon self-narrative. The texts within these two chapters represent Roth's most pointed engagements with theories of autobiography and the problems associated with attestations towards truth in narrative. The characters focused on throughout these chapters are concerned with the distinctions between factual and fictional modes of self-representation and how to formulate a mode of narration that best reflects their identities. Chapter One draws on theories of autobiography that serve to inform and illuminate Roth's concerns and engagement with autobiography as a mode of representation. The chapter subsequently focuses on three texts in which Roth pointedly engages with autobiographical or pseudo-autobiographical representation in order to illustrate the difficulty of distinguishing between the facts and fictions that contribute to, and construct, narrativised selves.

¹⁰ Paul John Eakin, *Living Autobiographically: How we create identity in narrative*, 2.

Attempts at narratives that claim to be uncontestedly factual will be shown in *The Facts* to be ineffective in their ability to convey the experience of self-identity through narrative. This movement away from stringent and confining contracts of genre will be illustrated through Roth's progressive concern, interrogation, and subsequent subversion, of the generic laws governing narrative representation in the texts now referred to as his "Roth Books"; books that, with the exception of *The Plot Against America*, belong to Roth's middle-to-early-late period of writing.¹¹

Chapter Two will develop on the concepts of representation highlighted as problematic in the preceding chapter. The characters within *My Life as a Man*, *The Facts: a Novelist's Autobiography*, and *Patrimony: a True Story* are deeply concerned with choosing the "correct" mode or method to represent and convey self-identity. They struggle to attain a mode of self-narration that cohesively sustains their identities, or in the case of *Patrimony*, a mode of narration that suitably re-creates a narrative for an absent self intrinsic to the identity of the narrator. The characters within the texts of Chapter Two represent significant milestones in Roth's experimentation with the insufficiencies of divisively factual or fictional modes of self-narration through their position as characters that actively employ methods of impersonation and improvisation that eschew and move beyond the binaries of fact and fiction.

Deception and *Operation Shylock* signify Roth's rejection of "autobiography" as a concept that relates somehow to "fact" or "truth", in favour of self-improvised narratives in which identity is a fluid and performative construct brought into being through a character's ability to narrate autobiographically. From here the concept of "autobiography" is actively disassociated from its literary

¹¹ *The Plot Against America*, while included in the category of "Roth books" due to the inclusion of the protagonist "Philip Roth", will not be explored throughout this thesis as it does not relate directly to the concerns of my argument. Although Roth characterises both himself and his parents within the novel, it is not to challenge, undermine, or subvert modes of representation, autobiographical or not. *The Plot Against America* is revisionist history and the primary role of the "Philip Roth" character, who is only a child within this novel, is to react to and convey this historical moment, as opposed to his previous "adult" appearances as a deconstructor of generic boundaries between fact and fiction. While the portraits of Roth's parents throughout *The Plot Against America* do indeed qualify as a form of Eakinian relational identity, this thesis posits *Patrimony* as a more relevant and accomplished example of relational identity through narrative and one that is on the whole more suited to the concerns of this thesis. It is for this reason that *Patrimony* has been chosen in lieu of *The Plot Against America*, whose concern is more with how the relational identities of his mother and father respond to an imagined and revisionist history than with how, as is the case with *Patrimony*, relational identity itself is brought to light in fiction.

context, a context that imposes regulations that Roth, as a novelist concerned with representations of subjectivity and self-identity, rejects as acceptable reflections of how people actually experience their sense of self. Both texts, however, blatantly exploit Roth's own biography; an aspect of these novels that led to many of Roth's most savage critical misreadings and the charges of narcissism mentioned above. Through a corrective reading of these novels the role of Roth's biography will be re-assessed in order to illustrate that the "Philip" and "Philip Roth" characters are included, not for narcissistic reasons, but in order to better demonstrate and understand how the fictional process operates by illustrating the true complexity found within narratives of the self.

Taking autobiography out of a contractual literary context and presenting it rather as an act of living wherein characters sustain themselves through fictions grounded in impersonation, improvisation, and self-invention, guides the argument of this thesis into Chapters Three and Four. The thesis moves to follow the selves presented within Roth's major works of the late nineties and early millenium and perhaps Roth's most fully-realised presentations of selves that actively engage in "living autobiographically". The works of the American Trilogy, *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, and *The Human Stain*, are examined through their protagonists' attempts to radically "author" themselves into or against the social, political, and historical moments in which they find themselves encased. The chapters will examine how these selves negotiate their self-identity amidst the socio-political determinants that serve to counteract or destabilise their efforts at autonomous self-gestation. Each protagonist is shown within this analysis to "live autobiographically", as "walking texts" who attempt to script their identities and subsequently align their surrounding realities or interlocutors into narratives that best compliment their sense of their autobiographical or storied self.

As stated earlier, the texts examined in Chapters One and Two have been categorised as "Roth books". The American Trilogy, under the general category of "Zuckerman Books", is held together by its position as what Roth identifies to be "a thematic Trilogy, dealing with the historical moments in postwar American life that have had the greatest impact on my generation."¹² Chapter Three opens with

¹² Philip Roth, "Zuckerman's Alter-Brain", interview by Charles McGrath, *The New York Times*, 7 May 2000. <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/05/07/reviews/000507.07mcgrat.html>> [accessed October 2009].

an analysis of *Sabbath's Theater*. With its provocative and obscenely transgressive character Mickey Sabbath, *Sabbath's Theater* has been considered as something of an aberration within Roth's novels and in particular in its relation to the American Trilogy. This can be seen from its categorised position within Roth's oeuvre under the abstract section, "Other Books". This thesis seeks to realign Sabbath with the improvising characters of the American Trilogy. This is reflected in the structure of the thesis as it pointedly includes Sabbath as the opening text to the chapters that contain the texts of the American Trilogy. Sabbath is a perfect, if somewhat antithetical example, to the themes of improvising self-narrative demonstrated through the characters of Roth's trilogy. This recognition of Sabbath's role as an enabler to the protagonists within the trilogy has been pointedly acknowledged by Roth in an interview with Charles McGrath:

When I look back now, I see that '*Sabbath's Theater*' is the real turning back to American stuff. Mickey Sabbath's is such an American voice. And after him, if not out of him, came the American Trilogy.¹³

The examination of the protagonists within the American Trilogy will thus be preceded by an in-depth analysis of Sabbath the "anti-illusionist" as a fascinating example of an individual character who has taken the act of self-narrative to an unprecedented level of commitment and intensity. Like the protagonists of the American Trilogy, Sabbath, in his commitment to his continually revised performances of self, is actively fighting against culturally sanctioned models, or narratives, of identity. Like the figures in the trilogy he places himself in radical opposition to the pre-scribed modes of living he finds himself presented with. However, Sabbath differs from the characters of the trilogy because what he is desiring is an antithetical narrative, one that is nihilistic in its refusal to script an alternative narrative to substitute the one rejected.

Significantly, the American Trilogy is united by the fact that each individual text can be categorised as a tragedy because the main protagonists of each text fail in their efforts to sustain their identities within the narratives they have constructed for themselves. While Sabbath actively seeks out nihilism, the protagonists of the American Trilogy seek to replace a given self-identity with an identity of their own construction. Furthermore the trilogy is united by the fact that

¹³ Ibid.

they are all narrated by Nathan Zuckerman. It is Zuckerman, the purported narrator of Roth's trilogy, who "writes" the narratives of these characters and Zuckerman who suggests that their self-narratives arise out of a desire for self-invention and re-invention. Throughout the analysis of these texts Zuckerman will be considered as a character who fundamentally sustains himself through the narratives of others, the narratives he is relaying throughout the American Trilogy, and consequently as yet another example of the "walking texts" of Roth's self-sustaining fictions.

The failure of the protagonists within the American Trilogy is brought about because of a failure of their chosen narrative. The narrative they have chosen to inhabit or aim for as their preferred storified self turns out to be in some way insufficient to allow for the continuation of their narrativised identities. This concept of a failure of narrative brings us into Chapter Five and the extraordinary surge of writing Roth has displayed in his post-trilogy years. Like the protagonists of Chapters Three and Four, the characters of Chapter Five experience their identity as "walking texts"; they too "live autobiographically"¹⁴ and, like their predecessors, they too experience a disturbing rupture in their narrativised experience of identity. However, unlike the trilogy this fissure is not brought about by a failure to maintain narrative continuity in relation to their respective self-identities. Rather, the individuals that occupy the texts of *The Dying Animal*, *Everyman*, *Exit Ghost*, and *Indignation*, experience the unhinging effect bodily interjection has upon a narrativised understanding and experience of identity. In these texts the body, and more specifically the *failing* body, acts as a competing narrative to the self-sustained fictions the protagonists have heretofore relied upon and inhabited in an unproblematic manner. By exploring this highly significant shift in focus to the destabilising loss of identity experienced when the body no longer coheres to the individual's concept of self, the final chapter develops in a significant way on the previous four chapters. The concept of self-representation through narratives of self-impersonation and improvisation continually illustrated throughout this thesis as a key component to Roth's representation of the self are moved into the territory of corporeal identity. The body interrupts the self's narrative and as a result, the narratives through which these characters exist as selves are no longer sufficient. These "walking texts" must now attempt to adjust

¹⁴ Paul John Eakin, *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative*.

their narratives to accommodate the impositions of age or injury and consequently realign their narratives to reflect and encompass the reality of their corporeality.

Chapter One

Autobiography as a mode of living in Philip Roth: *The Facts, My Life as a Man and Patrimony*

I. An overview of the theories that inform Roth's engagement with autobiography

Early attempts to establish theories of autobiography rely upon the sanctity of a coherent and singular subject, one based primarily on the Romantic concept of self as an autonomous and transcendent being. For theorists such as Georges Gusdorf, the autobiographical "I" is based upon a definitive referent that exists prior to its inscription in the text. As Linda Anderson suggests, for such critics "there is little apparent difference [...] between realizing the self and representing the self."¹⁵ The change in perception of the autobiographical subject from singular and autonomous, to a manifold, culturally, and historically determined being, as Paul Jay has successfully documented, is clearly a result of changing twentieth-century views of "both the psychological 'self' and the literary subject".¹⁶ In his effort to create consciousness in narrative Roth's representation of the self, of what it means to be a self in the twentieth- and twenty-first century, discounts the very notion of the singular, autonomous, model of self-identity conveyed in traditional and conventional models of autobiography. Paul John Eakin, the foremost theorist of autobiography and its changing trajectory, forwards a model of identity that can be directly aligned with Roth's representation of self. Eakin seeks to understand the experience of selfhood as plural and polymorphous. His work is primarily concerned with how the self and selfhood are apprehended and expressed, particularly in the act of writing. Eakin's reading of autobiography is based on what he terms "registers of self and self-experience"¹⁷, a theory that accounts for the number of different ways through which self-identity is experienced, expressed, and registered. The term "registers of self," in stressing the plurality of experiential concepts of identity, automatically contradicts the notion that selfhood

¹⁵ Linda Anderson, *Autobiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 4-5.

¹⁶ Paul Jay, *Being in the Text: Self-Representation from Wordsworth to Roland Barthes* (London: Cornell University Press, 1984), 13.

¹⁷ Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (London: Cornell University Press, 1999), xi.

is only perceived, and experienced, as singular. Eakin's "registers of self" serves to move the experience and perception of identity away from the myth of the autonomous self by positing a model of identity that is relational and based upon the self as corporeal as opposed to exclusively cerebral or linguistic.

Roth's concept of selfhood, as displayed in the works examined throughout this thesis, falls in line with Eakin's relational and plural model of identity as it similarly subverts any attempt to classify the self as singular and autonomous; stressing rather the plurality, relational, and corporeal aspects of identity while questioning the stability of language-based constructions of identity. Relational identity, as conceived of by Eakin, and apparent in Roth's *Patrimony*, is a model of identity that seeks to understand self-identity amidst determining social interactions which demythologizes the illusion of selfhood as autonomous self-gestation. It seeks to convey and emphasize the "extent to which the self is defined by—and lives in terms of—its relations with others."¹⁸ For Eakin, relational identity is crucial to understanding how identity is "truly plural in its origins and subsequent formation".¹⁹ This, Eakin stresses, is easily forgotten because "autobiography promotes an illusion of self-determination: *I write my story; I say who I am; I create my self*".²⁰

In interview with Asher Z. Milbauer and Donald G. Watson, Roth expounds his concept of the way people actually experience their sense of identity:

[T]here is nothing unusual about somebody's changing his story. People constantly change their story—one runs into that every day [...] We are all writing fictitious versions of our lives all the time, contradictory but mutually entangling stories that, however subtly or grossly falsified, constitute our hold on reality and are the closest thing we have to truth.²¹

Eakin states a similar view when he suggests that "autobiography is not merely something we read in a book; rather, as a discourse of identity, delivered bit by bit in the stories we tell about ourselves day in and day out, autobiography structures our living."²² With its emphasis on impersonation, improvisation, the creation of masks, and the constant reinvention of self, Roth's representation of the subject

¹⁸ Ibid., 43.

¹⁹ Ibid., 43.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Roth, *Reading Myself and Others* (London: Cape, 1975; London: Vintage, 2001), 161.

²² Eakin, "What Are We Reading When We Read Autobiography?", *Narrative* 12.2 (2004), <<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/narrative/v012/12.2eakin.html>> [accessed August 2009].

also challenges the static view of identity implied by the self of conventional and contractual versions of autobiography. Roth uses the specific term “impersonation” to describe not only his act of writing but also to explain his concept of the written self:

You don't necessarily, as a writer, have to abandon your biography completely to engage in the act of impersonation. [...] You distort it, caricature it, parody it, you torture and subvert 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. (*RMAO*, 124)

Whether as a means of self-expression, self-invention, self-concealment, or a combination of all three, Roth explores in his writings how exactly such a process contributes to and constitutes the creation of a written self. By creating and representing selves that, like the “[m]illions of people [who] do this all the time,” actually “*mean*” their performances of self to stand in place of, or for, the self, Roth's studies in self-representation are an attempt to locate and explore the role improvisation plays in an individual's “biography”. In order to give their “biography that dimension,” Roth's subjects thus continually engage in varying acts of impersonation and improvisation throughout their daily lives.

Roth's construction of consciousness is one based upon the idea of living autobiographically, or as Eakin states, not necessarily writing autobiography but “*living* autobiography, performing it in our daily lives”.²³ Rather than viewing Roth as a writer who incorporates his own biography as a result of imaginative weakness, or indeed narcissism, it is more productive to recognise his work as a conscious and relentless commitment to writing about characters that live autobiographically. The distortions, caricatures, parodies, tortures, and subversions of Roth's biography present within his work are illustrative of the ways in which Roth's protagonists exist within the texts; constantly improvising and playing upon the notion of an “irreducible self” that, as Zuckerman claims in *The Counterlife*, “may even be the root of all impersonation”.²⁴ For Roth then, the self exists only insofar as it is impersonation and performance. The natural state of a being lies in this ability to perform and, as is often the case, to perform *autobiographically*.

²³ Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, 101.

²⁴ Roth, *The Counterlife* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986; London: Vintage, 1996), 320.

Here Roth also comes close to the sociologist Anthony Giddens's definition of autobiography as a core structure of self-identity:

autobiography—particularly in the broad sense of an interpretative self-history produced by the individual concerned, whether written down or not—is actually at the core of self-identity in modern social life. Like any other formalised narrative it has to be worked at, and calls for creative input as a matter of course.²⁵

Relational narratives, Eakin asserts, “defy the boundaries we try to establish between genres, for they are autobiographies that offer not only the autobiography of the self but the biography *and* the autobiography of the other”.²⁶ Defying generic boundaries is an implicit aspect of Roth's exploration of modes of representation throughout the works covered in this chapter. As we shall see below, *The Facts* and *Patrimony* demonstrate two vastly different approaches to the act of self-writing. What is common to both, however, and is a significant aspect of Roth's entire canon, is the displacement of the subject from self-determined and autonomous identity to a relational and variously determined concept of selfhood. This is not to say that Roth's characters do not strive for self-determination or ultimately conceive of the self as such. In fact, this striving is often what defines not only his fictional characters but also the self-representations of “Philip Roth” present in *The Facts* and *Patrimony*. The comic and tragic elements found in his work result, more often than not, from his characters' collision with the myth of autonomous self and their attempts at self-gestation in spite of its impossibility. The Swede, Coleman Silk, Ira Ringold, and Alexander Portnoy exemplify this collision, as does Roth in his presentation of his own self-formation in *The Facts*. The concept of the subject put forward in Roth's writing is thus never fixed or static. In opposition, his writing, which he describes as “a large effort of realism, [...], about consciousness and self-consciousness”²⁷, is precisely about the difficulties of representing identity.

Roth explores the interface between subjectivity, corporeality, and bodily attire in a way that cogently illustrates Eakin's argument in relation to registers of

²⁵ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 76.

²⁶ Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, 58.

²⁷ Roth, quoted in Hermione Lee, “‘Life Is and’: Philip Roth in 1990”, *Conversations with Philip Roth*, George J. Searles ed., (Jackson: Mississippi University Press, 1992), 265.

self and self-representation. Both Eakin and Roth's positioning of the self as corporeal and relational conflicts with Philippe Lejeune's attempt to stringently categorise and contain autobiography within the terms set out in his essay "The Autobiographical Contract"²⁸, the terms of which will be discussed as they arise in relation to the texts within this chapter. The protagonists of the works discussed within this chapter are deeply concerned with their own life stories, with the verbal processes that contribute to their understanding and awareness of their (auto)biographical selves. While Philippe Lejeune's autobiographical contract imparts a set of governing rules for self-representation, Roth, as we shall see in the following section, deconstructs any such notion of generic laws governing written representations of self. The section that follows explores some of those modes of representation through a discussion of *My Life as a Man*, *The Facts*, and *Patrimony*.

II. *My Life as a Man*

i) Autobiography as "the low road of candor"²⁹

Before Roth made himself the lead protagonist of a work such as *The Facts*, a text that explicitly problematises the autobiographical "I", he had addressed the position of the autobiographical self most notably in *My Life as a Man*. The narrative layering of this pseudo-autobiography makes use of poststructuralist theories of the subject as a textual being; simultaneously demonstrating and ridiculing the performative nature of the self as the drama of the novel centres upon the existent/nonexistent status of the subject. Peter Tarnopol begins his "True Story" in the hope of solidifying his subjectivity. Tarnopol wants to use language to put shape and existence to the being he believes to be his "self". What the text suggests however, is that there is no self, no referent beyond the words that make up the book. *My Life as a Man* thus affirms the contradictions embedded in the concept of autobiography. In highlighting the self as a fictional

²⁸ Philippe Lejeune, "The autobiographical contract", *French Literary Theory Today: A reader*, Tzvetan Todorov ed., (Cambridge: London: New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 193.

²⁹ Roth, *My Life as a Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974; New York: Vintage International, 1993), 232.

being, the text illustrates how the self in an autobiographical narrative exists only within the words of that writing.

Tarnopol's fruitless search for his own referential subject prefigures the arguments put forth in Paul de Man's celebrated essay, "Autobiography as De-Facement." In this essay de Man refutes the referential claim of the autobiographical text and dismisses the possibility of autobiography existing at all as a genre. De Man asserts that autobiography "is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts."³⁰ For de Man, this mode of self-representation signals the metaphorical death of the subject, it is epitaphic because it presents not the true subject but a mask created by the subject through the literary trope of prosopopeia, which, according to de Man is "the trope of autobiography, by which one's name [...] is made as intelligent and memorable as a face."³¹ This fictional face stands in place of the self which autobiography claims to be representing. Hence autobiography actually enacts a de-facement of the subject, as the self of actuality is replaced by language. Under these terms, knowledge of a referential subject is an illusion, as the self of the text has become merely a fictive construct. Tarnopol's flaw as a writer attempting autobiography is that he refuses to recognise the fictions implicit in any attempt to create a self through narrative.

Shostak, considering the implications of *My Life as a Man*, echoes de Man in suggesting that the novel illustrates how "despite our convention that autobiography is a genre, that it is possible to write the self, the genre is effectively self-cancelling."³² Patrick O'Donnell concurs, suggesting that Tarnopol's identity, his life as a man, "exists as a palimpsest of directions, defacements, and intensities that defines the writing subject in a continuous process of (self)-erasure and (self)-inscription that never comes to unity or completion."³³ Tarnopol's attempts to convey himself through narrative are thus fraught with anxiety. His expectations for his autobiography parody the very idea of autobiography as a medium for self-representation. "My True Story" is Tarnopol's attempt to exorcise the trauma of his "nightmarish marriage" (*MLAM*, 99 emphasis in original), a marriage that was

³⁰ Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement", *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 70.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 76.

³² Shostak, *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives*, 171.

³³ Patrick O'Donnell, "None Other": The Subject of Roth's *My Life as a Man*", *Reading Philip Roth*, Milbauer, Asher Z., and Donald G. Watson eds., (New York: St. Martin's, 1988), 156.

only dissolved after Maureen Tarnopol's "violent death" (*MLAM*, 99). On "the subject of the late Mrs. Tarnopol" he is "a man possessed" (*MLAM*, 100 emphasis in original). Referring to himself in the third person, Tarnopol explains how, as well as beginning psychoanalysis, he has turned to autobiography as a means of "demystify[ing] the past and mitigat[ing] his admittedly un-commendable sense of defeat", both in relation to his marriage and in his attempts to exorcize it by transforming it into fiction (*MLAM*, 100-101, emphasis in original).

The form and narrative structure of the novel debates the fundamental role of autobiography as a means of conveying the self through writing. *My Life as a Man* opens with "A Note to the Reader" stating the following: "The two stories in part I, 'Useful Fictions,' and part II, the autobiographical narrative 'My True Story,' are drawn from the writings of Peter Tarnopol"(emphasis in original). Tarnopol's "True Story" is preceded by two "Useful Fictions" that are intended as guides to the reader by providing them with fictional material that is supposed to prepare them for the subsequent "True Story". The reader soon discovers that "Salad Days" and "Courting Disaster," taken from the fictional writings of Tarnopol, concern not Tarnopol, but the early history and disastrous marriage of Nathan Zuckerman. They are examples of Tarnopol's fictionalised attempts to understand his own disastrous marriage, conveyed later in his "True Story". In the "Useful Fictions", Tarnopol is thus using Zuckerman as a "stand in" for his own biographical self. However, when Tarnopol begins to find fiction an inadequate form he quickly turns to non-fiction as a means of presenting his self-story. In attempting, or even purporting, to convey or allow access to what is supposed to be (if one is to abide by Lejeunian contract) an actual, "true" authorial self, these fictions present both in the "Useful Fictions" and later in "My True Story" are thus serious interrogations of the appropriate modes of understanding, knowing and conveying a character or life through narrative.

In demonstrating how Tarnopol is using Zuckerman as a way into his own life story, Tarnopol's efforts at "Zuckermanizing [him]self" (*MLAM*, 232), Roth is re-enacting a criticism that many of Roth's critics have laid against his own writings. Reviewing *My Life as a Man*, Morris Dickstein suggested that the novel "confirms that despite his superb gifts as a mimic, *tumbler* and hyperbolist Roth is

only good at fantasticating materials from his own life.”³⁴ Roth is utilising this shift of form to interrogate and seek out the most appropriate medium for representing identity, specifically for representing an identity engaged in autobiographical writing. This is further complicated by the knowledge that the layered narrative in operation within *My Life as a Man* has certain relevance to Roth’s own biography. In an interview with Hermione Lee for *The Paris Review*, Roth admitted that this text was as close as he could come to writing about his own disastrous first marriage to Margaret Martinson.³⁵ Roth thus loosely includes “himself” as a character who could conform to the vague biographical schema within which both Zuckerman and Tarnopol belong in *My Life as a Man*. Only the reader who has digested Zuckerman’s “story” will note its similarity to Tarnopol’s own “True Life” and thus draw the conclusion that they are interlinked in some way. Similarly, only the reader aware of Roth’s own biography will note and comment on the similarity, however transformed, between “Roth” and his characters.

However, it is this very tendency to align Roth’s biography with his fictional writing that is being criticised and overtly parodied throughout *My Life as a Man*. If *My Life as a Man* illustrates nothing else it is that Tarnopol’s fraught attempts to convey his “True Story”, both through Zuckerman (his fictional creation), and the “I” of his “True Story”, will ultimately end in disillusionment and failure if this process is adhered to in an anxiously homogenous method: “as far as I can see there is no conquering or exercising the past with words—words born either of imagination or forthrightness” (*MLAM*, 233). The self Tarnopol conveys in writing is a construct as fictional as the “Useful Fictions” that precede his “True Story.” Tarnopol’s refusal to recognise that the written self is a creation leads to the eventual failure of his project. Just as Tarnopol uses “truth” and fiction in the attempt to tell his story, in interjecting certain biographical correlatives relating to his own life, Roth uses his own biography to interrogate the relationship

³⁴ Morris Dickstein, “Now Vee May Perhaps Have Begun”, review of *My Life as a Man* by Philip Roth. *The New York Times*, 2 June 1974. <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/10/11/specials/roth-man.html>> [accessed October 2009]

³⁵ When asked by Lee if he could talk about his marriage, Roth replies “It took place so long ago I no longer trust my memory of it. The problem is complicated further by *My Life as a Man*, which diverges so dramatically in so many places from its origin in my own nasty situation that I’m hard put, some twenty-five years later, to sort out the invention of 1975 to the facts of 1959 [...] I can only tell you that that was my time as an infantryman, and *My Life as a Man* is the war novel I wrote some years after failing to receive the Distinguished Service Cross” (*RMAO*, 128).

between fact and fiction; highlighting the inadequacies of a stringent, Lejeunian autobiographical contract as the most effective way of narrativising the self.

However, it is Tarnopol, and not Roth, who seems to have difficulty dislocating himself from the fictions he generates. Tarnopol cannot read himself, or others, outside the sphere of literature. As a patient of the psychiatrist Dr. Spielvogel, Tarnopol simultaneously resists and hankers after a reading of himself as a subject. Tarnopol desperately wants to be read (so as to be understood), but cannot accept the consequences of being read other than he imagines himself to be. He ends his analysis with Spielvogel because of an article the psychiatrist has written entitled “Creativity: The Narcissism of the Artist.” Tarnopol is enraged to discover that he is one of the patients described and analyzed in the article. For him, Spielvogel’s article reads as bad fiction and he is exasperated by the inaccuracy of the account:

I could not read a sentence in which it did not seem to me that the observation was off, the point missed, the nuance blurred—in short, the evidence rather munificently distorted so as to support a narrow and unilluminating thesis at the expense of the ambiguous and perplexing actuality. (*MLAM*, 243)

Tarnopol is dismayed by what he considers to be the “unflagging wrongness” (*MLAM*, 243) of Spielvogel’s interpretation. He is infuriated that Spielvogel should attempt to capture him in words by entering the privileged domain of the writer. Spielvogel is accordingly attacked for his “imprecise language” (*MLAM*, 255). The debate that ensues between Tarnopol and Spielvogel centers upon the ethics of writing. As a novelist, Tarnopol feels exempt from such ethical responsibility, telling Spielvogel:

you are bound by ethical considerations that happen not to be the ones that apply to my profession. Nobody comes to me with confidences the way they do to you, and if they tell me stories, it’s not so that I can cure what ails them. That’s obvious enough. It’s the nature of being a novelist to make private life public—that’s a part of what a novelist is up to. (*MLAM*, 253)

This nature is one that Tarnopol finds increasingly difficult as Tarnopol’s attempt to make his own life public, as demonstrated in the preliminary “Useful Fictions”, are rejected in favour of an “autobiographical”, “True Story”.³⁶

³⁶ In his review of *My Life as a Man*, Morris Dickstein makes a further connection between the events in *My Life as a Man* and the biography of its author when he attacks Roth’s own ethics as a writer.

The extent to which he is struggling to transform his experience into art is demonstrated in his response to a paper he composes from the viewpoint of Karen Oakes, a student with whom he has conducted an illicit affair. In his response to the paper, entitled “The Uses of the Useful Fictions”, he addresses his predicament. Tarnopol admits that so far the “Zuckermanizing” (*MLAM*, 232) of his life has failed to put the experience of his ill-fated marriage to Maureen to rest and therefore he resorted to “autobiography”, or as he refers to it, “the low road of candor” (*MLAM*, 232). Yet the untransformed tale brings its own drawbacks, not least an ethical responsibility, which he didn’t feel as a writer of fiction, but the fear that even non-fiction cannot render his experiences whole. The impasse between the actuality and its reconstruction in language is ever increasing, as Tarnopol realises that the autobiographical subject “is beginning to seem as imaginary as my Zuckerman anyway [...] his revelations coming to seem like still another “useful fiction” (*MLAM*, 233). Tarnopol is left with the inadequate tools of his trade, while he is trying to “keep to the facts” (*MLAM*, 233), “words being words, only approximate the real thing” (*MLAM*, 233). Faced with the impenetrability of language, Tarnopol realises that all he can do is wrestle with it “all I can do with my story is tell it. And tell it. And tell it. And *that’s* the truth” (*MLAM*, 233). What Tarnopol cannot control, however, is the way in which people interpret his narrative. “Good God what a reading of my story *that* is!” (*MLAM*, 245) he declares in the aftermath of the Spielvogel article. The discovery that Tarnopol makes is that others determine his identity. No matter how hard he strives for self-determination and self-representation, Tarnopol continually finds himself the subject of someone else’s imagination; which, as a creation of Roth, he ironically happens to be.

What *My Life as a Man* enacts is the impasse of linguistic self-identity in which the self is only representable on a linguistic level and thus unfulfilling for the characters concerned as they seek out some “truth” within their own fictions. Tarnopol, as many of Roth’s subjects often do, resides in a metafictional world where “autobiography” can never be more real or truthfully representative than any

Dickstein states that “Roth makes an intense effort to “transcend ‘art’ and get down to unpleasant facts, which consist mainly of unpleasant facts about other people”. Dickstein, “Now Vee May Perhaps Have Begun”, review of *My Life as a Man* by Philip Roth. *The New York Times*, 2 June 1974.
<<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/10/11/specials/roth-man.html>> [accessed October 2009]

other “Useful Fiction” they might employ. Roth is addressing a central issue surrounding the composition of “autobiography”, asking how can it represent the self and how is it less fictional or less truthful than any other form of writing? The novel undermines a basic presumption of the conventional autobiographical text. Tarnopol tries to reclaim his identity from the narratives of others; a task that brings him to the point of exasperation. Facing his current girlfriend Susan, he thinks, “Oh, my God, I thought—now you. You being you! And *me!* This me who is me being me and none other!” (*MLAM*, 334).

If the autobiographical work is to end at the moment of writing, such linguistic verbiage when faced with a “real life” encounter at the end of the book (and thus the moment closest to the present state of the writing author *in reality*) fails to solidify Tarnopol’s singularity or his referentiality as a being that exists beyond the written text. He is faced with a “real” moment and can respond only in the self-cancelling, gnomic pronouncement “This me who is me being me and none other!” As O’Donnell notes, this statement raises the question “none other than who?”³⁷ If this is the question the reader is left with at the end of the text then Tarnopol has failed to impart the “who?” of *My Life as a Man*. The final line of the novel thus affirms the elusiveness and instability of Tarnopol’s subjectivity; undermining the claims that his pronoun “I” (as the none other than me) refers to an actual man whose life can be located in a male referent beyond the text of *My Life as a Man*. In *My Life as a Man*, Roth sets up the factual and fictional constituents of an individual’s life almost as rivals and demonstrates the difficulties that emerge when one attempts to represent the self in writing coupled with the impossibility of representing selves if one does not accept the transformative power of fiction.

III. *The Facts*

i) The Novelist’s Truth?

In an interview with Alain Finkielkraut published in *Le Nouvel Observateur* and later reprinted in *Reading Myself and Others*, Roth asserts the

³⁷ O’Donnell, “None Other’: The Subject of Roth’s *My Life as a Man*”, Milbauer and Watson eds., 157.

following:

As for my autobiography I can't begin to tell you how dull it would be. My autobiography would consist almost entirely of chapters about me sitting alone in a room looking at a typewriter. The uneventfulness of my autobiography would make Beckett's *The Unnamable* read like Dickens. (RMAO, 100)

In 1988 Roth published *The Facts: a Novelist's Autobiography*. The central narrative of *The Facts* consists of the rather sedate story that Roth had suggested his autobiography would be, in this earlier interview. The publication of *The Facts* also contradicts Roth's claim in this same interview that his work should not be read as biographical confession. In response to a direct query as to whether or not Roth's fiction should be read as veiled confession, Roth states that he "has nothing to confess and no one [he] wants to confess to" (RMAO, 100). In this statement Roth seeks to distance himself biographically from the characters he writes. To the disappointment of the salacious reader, *The Facts* couldn't be further from revelation or a "Portnoyesque" tale. Roth's claim toward a relatively uneventful biography is confirmed and the "Philip Roth" as portrayed in *The Facts* is far removed from the public persona and perception of "Roth" that had grown from his fictions.³⁸ What makes *The Facts* interesting and vital to this study is not what it divulges about Roth, but the autobiographical debate it enacts. In a reversal of a strategy previously adopted by John Updike in the first installation of what was to become his Bech trilogy, *The Facts* immediately challenges the expectations that autobiography raises by opening with a letter from Roth addressed to his fictional character, Nathan Zuckerman.³⁹ Roth's story is framed with an opening letter from Roth to Zuckerman and a thirty-five-page reply from Zuckerman to Roth at the end of Roth's autobiographical narrative. In this reply Zuckerman questions the authenticity of autobiography and by implication, the authenticity of the subject "Philip Roth" who speaks throughout the narrative. As Shostak notes, "Roth gets to tell the life story that convinces us unquestioningly, and then he gets to ask

³⁸ In an interview with Joyce Carol Oates Roth suggests that his "public reputation" is "a concoction spawned by *Portnoy's Complaint* and compounded largely out of the fantasies that book gave rise to because of its 'confessional' strategy [...] There isn't much else it can be based on, since outside of print I lead virtually no public life at all" (RMAO, 85).

³⁹ John Updike, "Bech: A Book" *The Complete Henry Bech*. (London: New York: Penguin Modern Classics, 2006) Updike's *Bech: A Book* opens with a letter from the "acclaimed" fictional writer Henry Bech to Updike and ends with Bech interviewing Updike; a framing device similar to the ending of *The Facts* where Zuckerman responds to Roth's letter.

questions [through Zuckerman] about the presentation of that life story to disarm our doubts.”⁴⁰ Similarly, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt observes “hardly have certain questions begun to coalesce in the reader’s mind when Nathan Zuckerman comes on stage and not only articulates them but also connects them to further evasions that have not yet even occurred to the reader.”⁴¹

The central narrative of *The Facts* conforms to the conventional model of autobiography as put forth by Philippe Lejeune in “The Autobiographical Contract.” In “The Autobiographical Contract,” Lejeune defines autobiography as: “A retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality.”⁴² Lejeune stresses the referential aspect of the autobiographical text and from this position he puts forward the concept of an autobiographical pact. According to Lejeune, “there must be identity between the *author*, the *narrator*, and the *protagonist*.”⁴³ When the name of the protagonist equals the name of the author this “of itself excludes the possibility of fiction”.⁴⁴ It is thus necessary that the “author (whose name designates a real person) and narrator are identical”, and that the “narrator and protagonist are identical.”⁴⁵ This pact involves the consensus between author and reader that there is corresponding identity between the name on the title page, the narrator, and the protagonist. Consequently, *The Facts* requires the reader to adhere to the autobiographical contract in their reading of the central narrative. This is perhaps the *only* occasion in Roth where one has the possibility to enact an unproblematic Lejunian reading.

The five chapters that make up the autobiographical narrative of *The Facts* adhere to the conventional expectations of autobiography in that they chart Roth’s artistic journey from childhood to published author. It purports to account for who Roth is and how he reached his present condition of self. Each of the chapter headings take popular American phrases to introduce each of the life stages represented. Playing up to the illusionary nature of autobiography Roth *presents*

⁴⁰ Shostak, *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives*, 226.

⁴¹ Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, “Triple Play of Sorts: Roth to Zuckerman to Roth”, *Book of the Times: Review of The Facts* by Philip Roth. *The New York Times*, 15 September 1988. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1988/09/15/books/books-of-the-times-triple-play-of-sorts-roth-to-zuckerman-to-roth.html>> [accessed October 2009].

⁴² Lejeune, “The autobiographical contract”, 193.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 193.

his life through a homely, everyday lens. “Safe at Home,” “Joe College,” “Girl of My Dreams,” and “All in the Family”⁴⁶ position Roth’s “autobiography” within a generic trajectory of American life-writing, in particular, that of the immigrant success story. Roth opens his story by addressing the duality of the Jewish-American experience:

The greatest menace when I was growing up came from abroad, from the Germans and the Japanese, our enemies because we were American. [...] At home the biggest threat came from the Americans who opposed or resisted us—or condescended to us or rigorously excluded us—because we were Jews. (TF, 20)

The Facts pays homage to the ancestors’ journey and, while it is not a first-hand account of the immigrant experience, its success is registered and illustrated in the completeness of Roth’s American boyhood; a boyhood Roth later returns to in *The Plot Against America* (2004). Roth says that he never felt less American than “the Americans,” while simultaneously insisting that he never felt other than Jewish. As a young boy, being Jewish was an existence as unselfconscious as “having two arms and two legs” (TF, 31). It was never questionable or variable and the thought of not wanting to be Jewish seemed a ludicrous idea. This is particularly reflected in the opening stages of the autobiography when Roth describes the camaraderie between his childhood friends “stretched on our backs in the open night air, we were as carefree as any kids anywhere in postwar America, and certainly we felt ourselves no less American” (TF, 31). This camaraderie of the “we” is symbolic of their Jewish affiliation. It is also representative of their American identities and the ease with which they had been assimilated, subsequently furthering them from their ancestors’ emigrant past and their “socially useless old-country mores and perceptions” (TF, 32).

It is no surprise that the central narrative begins with this assessment of identity and the young Roth’s perception of his national character. This forging of an American identity is embraced as a motif throughout the narrative. It is, as one would expect, equated with independence, self-determinism, and an ingrained desire to strive for success. These are the underlying goals that the narrative exhibits. “I was not only a man, I was a free man” (TF, 87) is the resonating line of

⁴⁶ Roth, *The Facts: a Novelist’s Autobiography* (1988; repr., London: Vintage, 1997), 20, 35, 79, 113, and 131.

Roth's story. It grounds the narrative and the events that Roth relates either illustrate his attempts to exercise this freedom or his attempts to regain it after one event or another has compromised it. The irony of this desired independence is that his self-willed acts are shown to bring about his own entrapment. For example, his wooing of Josie, Roth's pseudonym for his first wife, Margaret Martinson, is explained in terms of the exhilaration he felt towards his newfound adult independence:

I was conducting my first semidomesticated love affair—even though their spectral presence was gigantic—nobody's parents were actually nearby [...] our seemingly incompatible backgrounds attested to my freedom from the pressure of convention and my complete emancipation from the constraining boundaries protecting my preadult life (*TF*, 87).

It was an emancipation he would not feel again until this same woman, whom he married and subsequently divorced, was fortuitously, in light of Roth's crippling alimony payments, killed in a car accident some twelve years later. At the news of her death Roth concedes he felt nothing but "immeasurable relief" (*TF*, 153) and once again asserts his independence: "I was determined to be an absolutely independent, self-sufficient man—to recapture [...] that exhilarating, adventurous sense of personal freedom" (*TF*, 160). Roth reveals how Josie embodied the prototype of his grandparents' "worst dream" (*TF*, 84):

She seemed to them nothing more or less than the legendary old-country shiksa-witch, whose bestial inheritance had doomed her to become a destroyer of every gentle human virtue esteemed by the defenceless Jew. (*TF*, 83-83)

He subsequently explains that he fell for Josie precisely *because*, and not in spite of, these "old-world" vices: "And just *because* of that, their American grandson refused to be intimidated" (*TF*, 84).

The same sense of defiance surfaces in "All in the Family" where Roth describes being at the mercy of "angry middle-class and establishment Jews" (*TF*, 113) who accused him of being anti-Semitic. Against this authoritarian force he must forge his self-identity and his self-defence. With the same gusto with which he met his grandparents' superstitions about the "legendary old shiksa-witch" (*TF*, 84), prejudices that he felt were obsolete in the democratic and "heterogeneous U.S.A" (*TF*, 84), Roth embraces the confrontation: "the most bruising public exchange of my life constituted not the end of my imagination's involvement with

the Jews, let alone an excommunication, but the real beginning of my thralldom” (TF, 129). Of his experience of being pitted against sectors of the Jewish community, Roth says, “the angry Jewish resistance that I aroused virtually from the start—was the luckiest break I could have had. I was branded” (TF, 130). The final chapter of the narrative “Now Vee May Perhaps to Begin,” taking its line from Portnoy’s therapist in *Portnoy’s Complaint*, is where the self starts after it has been emancipated. Roth presents a conventional, linear self-identity that conforms to his conventional, linear narrative. The “Philip Roth” portrayed throughout is determined to prove himself as a singular being and the form of the internal narrative reflects this.

Beyond what he writes about forging his identity against authoritarian forces and about the conscious self-fashioning that he partook of during his early academic career, little acknowledgement is given to the complex representations of identity that so dominantly pervade his fiction. The autobiography, considering what we know of Roth’s multifaceted examination of subjectivity, would at this point, if not for the intervention of Zuckerman, almost read as unconvincing parody. There is no sense of complexity towards the status of the subject he presents, no constant redress to the act involved in this presentation, none of the metafictional tropes so prevalent in Tarnopol’s attempts at autobiography in *My Life as a Man*. Just as I have argued *My Life as a Man* works to illustrate how fiction works as a transformative medium in the representation of self and, in particular, of traumatic events; *The Facts* illustrates how inefficient, restrictive, and in this case outright boring sticking to the (purely biographical) facts can be. As Justin Kaplan remarks, the central narrative of *The Facts*:

tends to be without spin, flat and sentimental [...] recollections of bagels, baseball and brawls might have come from a thousand other men in their 50’s who shared Roth’s experience but lack his comic and satiric genius for turning it into performance⁴⁷.

Crucially however, Kaplan suggests how “these stylistic lapses may be a part of Roth’s game, a way of showing, beyond argument, that niceness offers no future

⁴⁷ Justin Kaplan, “Play It Again, Nathan”, review of *The Facts* by Philip Roth. *The New York Times*, 25 September 1988. <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/10/11/specials/roth-autobio.html>> [accessed January 2009].

for a writer.”⁴⁸ This is precisely the case as Zuckerman’s wife Maria suggests that “[i]n the mask of Philip he’s too nice” (*TF*, 191).

Facts without fictions result in a narrative that is as uneventful as *My Life as a Man* is structurally layered, emotionally nuanced, and engagingly complex. By purposely choosing to write without any of the techniques of fiction that so preoccupied Tarnopol in *My Life as a Man*, and that are so prevalent in Roth’s other fictions (*The Counterlife*, *Deception*, *Operation Shylock*), Roth is demonstrating what is actually entailed in the fictional process. The blandness of *The Facts* stresses precisely what type of work emerges when the author stops giving way to transformation. The “Philip” of *Deception* states that “[w]hat heats things up is compromising me.”⁴⁹ According to Philip this “compromising [...] kind of makes the indictment jucier” and consequently, when the author stops “compromising” the self, the “uneventfulness” of the resultant narrative, as is the case in *The Facts*, “make[s] Beckett’s *The Unnamable* read like Dickens” (*RMAO*, 117).

ii) Zuckerman’s Complaint

In the letter from Roth to Zuckerman at the opening section of *The Facts*, Roth claims that he wants to present the non-performing self, a self not encased in his fictional creations. He is thus claiming to pursue the traditional purpose of autobiography we have argued *The Facts* adheres to within its autobiographical sections. Zuckerman, however, refutes this intention. In his letter to Roth Zuckerman claims “you’ve written metamorphoses of yourself so many times, you no longer have any idea what *you* are or ever were. By now what you are is a walking text” (*TF*, 162). Here Zuckerman undermines the epistemological status of the speaking subject. Roth’s letter suggests that the autobiography was an attempt to recover the loss of self he experienced after a physical and mental breakdown thought to be instigated by sleeping tablets prescribed in the aftermath of minor knee surgery:

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Roth, *Deception* (London: Vintage, 1990; London: Vintage, 2006), 177.

In the spring of 1987, at the height of a ten-year period of creativity, what was to have been minor surgery turned into a prolonged physical ordeal that led to an extreme depression that carried me right to the edge of emotional and mental dissolution. (*TF*, 5)

As Kaplan notes, this “is as specific as he gets about ‘the facts’ of what he twice refers to as a ‘crack-up’”.⁵⁰ Roth’s use of the term “crack up” is a clear allusion to F. Scott’s Fitzgerald’s “The Crack-Up” in which Fitzgerald detailed his own emotional bankruptcy suggesting that “all life is a process of breaking down”.⁵¹ This breaking down brought Roth to the brink of suicide. In the letter to Zuckerman Roth posits the writing of *The Facts* as a form of recuperation, a recovery process that would return him to his former sense of self. How easy it was for “Philip Roth”, by means of a simple sleeping tablet, to lose his sense and self-awareness of himself as “Philip Roth” implies a fragility of identity that the writing of *The Facts* seeks to counteract. In *The Facts* Roth asserts that it was his own story he wished to recover in order to stabilise the identity that he was beginning to regain after this breakdown. He does this through what can loosely be termed as an autobiographical text framed within two useful fictions that, while they are indeed fictional (concerning Roth’s interlocution with a fictional character), they are imbued with a sense of narrative authenticity and truthfulness that can be said to hold as much authority on “Philip Roth” as his comparatively un-illuminating central narrative.

This technique of writing as an act of recovery and recuperation is not confined to these self-declared non-fictional works. Similarly, the concept of a “walking text” seeking to re-discover, re-cover, or re-invent itself, is one of the key tropes of the Rothian oeuvre. Exploring this concept of the “walking text” is the key term of this thesis, a concept that is precisely captured in the epigraph to *The Facts*, lines which originally appeared in *The Counterlife*⁵²: “And as he spoke I was thinking, the kind of stories that people turn life into, the kind of lives that people turn stories into” (*TF*, epigraph). Just because the characters of Roth’s fictions are “fictional” does not mean that they, like the “Philip Roth” of *The Facts*, hold any more or less authenticity once they have been written and

⁵⁰ Kaplan, “Play It Again, Nathan”, *The New York Times*.

⁵¹ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Crack-Up and other pieces and stories* (Middlesex [UK]: Penguin Modern Classics, 1986), 39.

⁵² Roth, *The Counterlife*, 111.

committed to text. From Eli Peck to Neil Klugman to Portnoy, Kepesh, Zuckerman, and the “Philip Roth” of *Operation Shylock*, Roth’s characters rarely sit comfortably or truly confidently in their given identities. What often seems at risk in a Roth novel is the very hold these characters claim to have on their sense of self, a sense of self that Roth was attempting to regain for himself in writing *The Facts*: “the person I’ve intended to make myself visible to myself here has been myself” (*TF*, 4). Writing therefore holds a particular significance in terms of retaining these fragile selves, a responsibility Zuckerman feels the weight of throughout the American trilogy wherein he seeks to recreate vanished selves through narrative.

It is significant to note here how the acts of impersonation and ventriloquisms, acts Roth associates with the writer and which enabled him to transform his consciousness into that of a fictional other, seem worryingly unavailable to him now, as the author of the autobiographical narrative within *The Facts*. Roth notes how his desk, the place where he worked to transform experience into fiction, had become “a frightening, foreign place” (*TF*, 5). This subsequently caused him to doubt the specialist skill that defined him as a writer: “I came to believe that I just could not make myself over yet again” (*TF*, 5). Roth is specifically stressing here a distinction between modes of representation. Fiction requires a transformation that seems not to be required of the writer of autobiography. Roth felt that the only way to retrieve his sense of self, “to transform myself into myself”, was to begin “rendering experience untransformed” (*TF*, 5). Attempting to explain the means by which a writer shapes this untransformed reality and gives meaning to memory, Roth puts forth the following premise:

Memories of the past are not memories of facts but memories of your imagining of the facts. [...] It isn’t that you subordinate your ideas to the force of the facts in autobiography but that you construct a sequence of stories to bind up the facts with a persuasive hypothesis that unravels your history’s meaning. (*TF*, 8)

Although Roth addresses the ambiguous nature of the “facts” and admits that there is something “naïve about a novelist like myself talking about presenting himself ‘undisguised’ and depicting ‘life without the fiction’” (*TF*, 8), his letter to

Zuckerman suggests that in this instance he is willing to obey the generic laws, however illusionary, embedded in the term “autobiography”.

Within his letter to Zuckerman, Roth compares the experience of writing *The Facts* to “writing a book absolutely backward” (*TF*, 3). The analogy hints at his reservations towards autobiography. In going against his belief that the writer “should remain in the shadows” (*TF*, 4), Roth seems to be acceding to the view that autobiography is an inferior mode of writing. Yet in the aftermath of his breakdown, it seemed the only mode that enabled him to retrace the self and “restore [his] experience to the original, prefictionalized factuality” (*TF*, 3). The possibility of revealing any sort of factuality is, nevertheless, pointedly questioned and countered by Zuckerman. Taking Roth’s analogy a step further, Zuckerman suggests, “With this book you’ve tied your hands behind your back and tried to write it with your toes” (*TF*, 169). Zuckerman reminds Roth that autobiography is the “most manipulative of all literary forms” (*TF*, 172). Far from it being a medium for truth or self-recovery, Zuckerman insists that it masks the self it claims to represent: “With autobiography there’s always another text” he claims, “a countertext, [...] to the one presented” (*TF*, 172). Challenging Roth’s theory of recall and the reliability of memory, he suggests “the whole thing can be seen in an entirely different way from how it reads here” (*TF*, 174). For Zuckerman, autobiography is a self-censoring enterprise. In words recalling Tarnopol’s struggle to represent himself, he tells Roth that:

In fiction you can be so much more truthful without worrying all the time about causing direct pain. You try to pass off here as frankness what looks to me like the dance of the seven veils—what’s on the page is like a code for something missing (*TF*, 162).

What is missing, Zuckerman suggests, is the “Philip Roth” subject/author of the title page.

Zuckerman’s charge of the “walking text” again recalls de Man’s critique of Lejeunian autobiography. Zuckerman concedes to the view that knowledge of a referential subject is an illusion, posing the question to Roth, “Is this really ‘you’ or is it what you want to look like to your readers at the age of fifty-five?” (*TF*, 164). Where Roth considers his autobiography the “antidote” (*TF*, 6) to his fictional masks, Zuckerman simply considers it to be another mask. Zuckerman’s wife, Maria, also involved in the deconstruction, suggests “He’s not telling the truth

about his personal experience. In the mask of Philip he is not capable of doing it” (*TF*, 191). For Zuckerman, being “too nice” (*TF*, 191) is essentially the problem of the narrative. Zuckerman is looking to widen the parameters of Roth’s version of events because he rejects the medium that Roth is using. While as a fictional character it is in his interest to do this, Zuckerman ultimately believes that autobiography restricts the subject, telling Roth:

speaking as yourself, unprotected by the cunning playfulness of fictional masquerade, without all the exigencies of a full scale, freewheeling narrative to overwhelm the human, if artistically fatal, concern for one’s vulnerable self, you are incapable of admitting that you were more responsible for what befell you than you wish to recall. (*TF*, 175)

The sense that Roth is incapable of admitting this, or any part of his story without fear of exposure, pervades Zuckerman’s criticism. Zuckerman targets the ethics of autobiography, claiming that nothing can be permitted when the autobiographer is guided by the ethics of disclosure:

What one chooses to reveal in fiction is governed by a motive fundamentally aesthetic; we judge the author of a novel by how well he or she tells the story. But we judge morally the author of an autobiography, whose governing motive is primarily ethical as against aesthetic. (*TF*, 163)

It is notable that Zuckerman does not extend this ethic to reader expectation. There is no sense of him being concerned with the breaking of a reader/writer contract in terms of the truth the reader expects. In opposition, Zuckerman situates the ethics of autobiography in the personal life of the author and in terms of whom they may be protecting or harming by how much they choose to reveal (*TF*, 162). This is the crucial point for Zuckerman. He tells Roth that even using the framing device is an attempt to evade being accountable, “a self-defensive trick to have it both ways” (*TF*, 192). Zuckerman also draws attention to Roth’s narrative tone. In line with his writerly intellect, Roth had interpreted his wooing of Josie in terms of a literary exercise:

I was telling her who I thought I was and what I believed had formed me, but I was also engaged by a compelling form of narrative responsory. I was a countervoice, an antitheme, providing a naïve challenge to the lurid view of human nature that emerged from her tales of victimized innocence (*TF*, 93).

The fictional coating of these tales is not ignored as Roth asks of his own stories, “Was I exaggerating? Did I idealize?” (*TF*, 92) The question can of course be

applied to the text we are reading, yet Roth manages to convey a sense of authorial truth by the mocking tone he takes towards his twenty-three-year-old self. This tone serves to distract the reader, as if exposing the “self of the past” eliminates the “present self” from similar scrutiny. It is left to Zuckerman to point out the discrepancy:

Sometimes there is a cool gap between you as you were writing this book and you as you were when these things happened, and sometimes there isn't. [...] sometimes you seem to be looking back at this twenty-four-year-old, or whatever, a little wryly and at the expense of that person, and sometimes you're looking back at this person and feeling more or less the same things. (*TF*, 178)

H. Porter Abbot has considered this gap between the written and the writing self. Focusing on the actual present-time act of writing, Abbott regards autobiography as a “form of personal action.”⁵³ Less concerned with establishing the veracity of autobiographical texts, Abbott suggests that the difference “between an autobiography and a novel lies not in the factuality of the one and the fictiveness of the other but in the different orientations toward the text that they elicit in the reader.”⁵⁴ Abbott calls this orientation “reading autographically”:

In reading *autographically* everything changes. Even so whole and coherent a work as *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* acquires a certain tension as one keeps an eye on the textual action, tracking it at the same time as one tracks the life of the protagonist.⁵⁵

The structure of Roth's autobiography forces the reader to pay attention to the act of writing. Zuckerman's analysis makes it impossible for even the naïve reader, one unaccustomed with Roth's manipulative stylistics, to take Roth at his factual word. The very title of the novel is a reminder of this, as Kaplan observes:

The three component terms of his title—facts, novelist, autobiography—are charged particles whose shifting polarities, repulsions and attractions account for the book's hypomanic intensities as well as its occasional languors.⁵⁶

⁵³ H Porter Abbot, “Autobiography, Autography, Fiction: Groundwork for a Taxonomy of Textual Categories”, *New Literary History* 19.3, (Spring 1988), 601.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 603.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Kaplan, “Play It Again, Nathan”, *The New York Times*.

The very claims to genre that autobiography makes are being criticised by *The Facts*. Roth is questioning the assumptions implicit in works of fact and fiction. That the former is truth-telling and the latter imaginative personification is clearly disputed by the text. What *The Facts* implies is that all narrative is based on some sort of fiction, whether this is directly undertaken in the form of a novel, or indirectly achieved in the selected and selective memories of the autobiographer; and that the self it claims to represent, however verifiably “real” or “truthful”, is a self in the act of self-narrativisation.

IV. Patrimony

i) Writing the relational self

With *Patrimony* Roth turns to the representation of the relational “other.” The narrative charts the life, and more specifically the death, of his father Herman Roth. The trajectory of this self-reflective memoir lies in the act of remembering as it re-creates the final months of Herman’s life and Roth’s reaction to the ensuing death of his father. The book, as Michiko Kakutani notes, is “a willful and loving act of memory, a means by which he can both preserve and transcend the past, and give the messy facts of his father's life the luster and permanance of art.”⁵⁷ Throughout *Patrimony*, Roth conveys the sense of compulsion he felt towards representing his father in narrative: “I must remember accurately, [...] remember everything accurately so that when he is gone I can re-create the father who created me.”⁵⁸ This recreation of Herman is drawn from recollected conversations and incidents which Roth puts forward as quintessential examples of the type of person Herman Roth was. The remembering of “facts” from Herman’s life is imbued here with a marked seriousness as Roth presents his father’s story without the self-conscious deconstructive methods he used in the framework of letters that surround his own “autobiography,” *The Facts*. As Robert Pinsky observes, “The self-portrait

⁵⁷ Michiko Kakutani, “Art as a Bulwark Against Death”, Books of The Times: Review of *Patrimony* by Philip Roth. *The New York Times*, 1 January 1991. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1991/01/01/books/books-of-the-times-art-as-a-bulwark-against-death.html>> [accessed October 2009].

⁵⁸ Roth, *Patrimony: a True Story* (London: Vintage, 1991; London: Vintage, 1999), 177.

[in *Patrimony*] is more rounded and less self-conscious”⁵⁹ than it is in *The Facts*. Pinsky also notes how as a consequence “the reader's view of Philip Roth is enriched by the mirror of [*Patrimony*'s] central figure, the widower and retired insurance man Herman Roth.”⁶⁰ There is no antidote here, no Zuckerman waiting in the wings to undo the narrative. The dominant voice is that of the narrator which crucially comes to us through the reconstructed voice of Herman. Herman is, as Kakutani notes, “the point through which everything in the story, including its autobiographical narrator, must pass.”⁶¹

The six chapters that comprise the narrative are titled with phrases attributed to Herman, giving the reader a sense of that “unexpressive and unpoetic and point-blank” (*PTS*, 181) vernacular Roth associates with his father. While the chapter headings of *The Facts* have little emotional import and serve merely to highlight and parody the generic nature of Roth's attempt at self-writing, the chapter headings of *Patrimony* are elegiac in the weighted significance they hold in Roth's attempt to capture and recreate his father. The structural headings of *Patrimony* attest to a desire for authenticity; an authenticity that for Robert Pinsky confirms Roth “as a master of narrative of a definite kind—fast, accurate, free and deeply unpoetic: American storytelling at its least lyrical.”⁶² A sense of obligation towards accurate representation is palpable in the text. Roth had previously prioritised the fictional form over autobiography, using the latter almost entirely in an interrogatively subversive manner. With *Patrimony* however, he elevates the status of the non-fictional mode by choosing it as the most appropriate form for representing others, specifically his father.

Benjamin Hedin, speaking of Roth's representation of fathers, suggests how Roth's novels “together with the stories of Franz Kafka—could be said to form the definitive twentieth-century fiction on the condition of being a son”⁶³. Roth's work, Hedin notes, is “full of fathers who cast an inescapable influence on their sons”⁶⁴. This is indeed the case and one needs to look no further than Nathan

⁵⁹ Robert Pinsky, “Letting Go”, Review of *Patrimony* by Philip Roth. *The New York Times*, final edition, January 6, 1991. <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/10/11/specials/roth-patrimony.html>> [accessed October 2009]

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Kakutani, “Art as Bulwark Against Death”, *The New York Times*.

⁶² Robert Pinsky, “Letting Go”, *The New York Times*.

⁶³ Benjamin Hedin, “The Measure Of All Things: *Patrimony*”, *Philip Roth: New Perspectives on an American Author*, Derek Parker Royal ed., (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2005), 143.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

Zuckerman in the *Zuckerman Bound* trilogy to see just how inescapable this influence can be. In *Zuckerman Unbound*, Zuckerman is left to infer that his father's final word "bastard" is directed at him, "the apostate son": "It was here he uttered his last words. Word. Barely audible, but painstakingly pronounced. 'Bastard'".⁶⁵ Other notable fathers in Roth's fiction include Whitney Nelson in *When She Was Good*, Lou Levov in *American Pastoral*, Clarence Silk, Coleman's father in *The Human Stain* and, of course, Alexander Portnoy's famously constipated father in *Portnoy's Complaint*. Philip Roth's father, as portrayed in *Patrimony*, differs significantly from these fictional fathers. As Pinsky and Kakutani both note in their respective reviews of *Patrimony* this serves to highlight what "Roth has been pointing out for years now, [that] there are distinctions between life and art"⁶⁶, a distinction which the text of *Patrimony* seems intent on honouring.

In *Patrimony*, Roth characterises his apprehension towards recreating his father in the retelling of a dream he had after Herman's death. Roth recalls how, after choosing to bury his father in a shroud, Herman appeared in the dream to rebuke him: "I should have been dressed in a suit. You did the wrong thing" (*PTS*, 237). This rebuke represents Roth's fear that he had "dressed [his father] for eternity in the wrong clothes" (*PTS*, 237). The clothes, however, are a telling metaphor for the book: "In the morning I realized that he had been alluding to this book, which, in keeping with the unseemliness of my profession, I had been writing all the while he was ill and dying" (*PTS*, 237). This anxiety towards the writing profession is also one which has filtered into Roth's fictions of the late nineties. It is present in the narrative structure of the American trilogy, where Zuckerman reconstructs the lives of his peers. In *American Pastoral* for example, this is especially evident in Zuckerman's attempt to write an appropriate speech for his school reunion; he strives to "remember the energy"⁶⁷, to accurately recapture the precise feeling and sensations of the past. Roth's use of the term "unseemliness" in *Patrimony* raises ethical questions about the representation of others in narrative, particularly when that narrative is subtitled "a True Story."

⁶⁵ Roth, "Zuckerman Unbound", *Zuckerman Bound* (London: Vintage, 1989; London Vintage, 1998)

⁶⁶ Kakutani, "Art as a Bulwark Against Death", *The New York Times*.

⁶⁷ Roth, *American Pastoral* (London: Vintage, 1998), 40.

What kind of face does Roth restore to his father and how ethically sound is his representation?

In comparison to *The Facts*, *Patrimony* seems to achieve the objectivity that Roth is unable to obtain in his own autobiography, where there is very little revealed about the subject and much more said about the technique of life-writing. Here however, Roth exposes his protagonist candidly, letting his imagination settle on scenes that few would like recalled for the purpose of a good story. These scenes are, most notably the episode detailing Herman's loss of his ability to control his bowels, for the most part humiliating. Commenting on these unsparing details Eakin suggests that they raise questions concerning the ethical responsibility of the author, questions that become problematic in a relational and self-reflexive memoir such as *Patrimony*. "How do we sort out the legitimacy of life writing, how can we specify its responsibilities," Eakin asks "if we cannot say for sure where the 'I' begins and ends?"⁶⁸ Roth is, as we have seen, notably silent on the specifics of his own physical and mental illness in *The Facts*, yet here he does not show a similar restraint in relation to his father. He seems to be freed by having conceded the role of protagonist to his father and the need to remember everything seems to necessitate that he leave nothing out. Yet this mantra of remembering, which is the central motif of the narrative, is in conflict with Herman's request not to tell anyone certain aspects of his life-story. Following the crushing scene in the bathroom, he implores Roth not to tell the family. "Don't tell the children [...] Don't tell Claire" (*PTS*, 173). Despite Roth's assertion that he "won't tell anyone" (*PTS*, 173), his word is ultimately overwritten by the publication of the memoir where he not only tells his family, but also anyone who chooses to read the text. The conflicting commands in *Patrimony* epitomise, for Eakin "the ethical dilemmas of life writing". To "obey the father" Eakin states is "to omit the episode of the shit" but this subsequently denies "the son the climax of the story". Eakin stresses that "the climax of the story" is not merely "the rhetorical narrative [Roth] is writing" but "the psychological narrative of identity formation it recounts."⁶⁹ The identity recreated as a "walking text".

Roth is by no means ignorant of the criticism that could be levelled against these controversial and highly personal revelations. He does not deny his

⁶⁸ Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, 181.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 185.

“unseemliness” (*PTS*, 237) and is aware of the unflattering light that the very act of composition sets him in. Yet the crucial point that needs to be asserted here, as Eakin has noted, is that both subject and narrator are implicated in this act of remembering. Writing about the voice of the biographer, Paula Backscheider notes:

The most invisible person in a biography is the most powerful—the author. At every moment his or her voice can be heard—but isn’t. Indeed it has been said that when we notice the biographer we have found an artistic and technical flaw. When we don’t notice, however, we risk forgetting how much of biography is interpretation rather than “fact” and why that matters so much.⁷⁰

While Backscheider’s study focuses mainly on biographies where the biographer bears no immediate relationship to their subject, her analysis reflects the extent to which the subject is at the direct mercy of the narrator, be they known to them or not. Biographies written by relatives or intimates are bound to reveal their presence. Yet, Roth’s voice so dominates the narrative of *Patrimony* that, as a biography of an “other,” it must fall into the technically flawed category described by Backscheider. The overt presence of Roth’s voice and the double representation that *Patrimony* enacts has thus led reviewers not to see it as a memoir or a biography but to remark on the extent to which the book actually reads as an autobiography of its narrator.⁷¹ *Patrimony*, as Eakin observes, is thus demonstrative of a “hybrid form in contemporary life writing [that] points up the limitations of generic classifications focused on individual selves and lives as discrete entities.”⁷²

Thought of as an autobiography, the representation of identity which Roth forwards throughout *Patrimony* is clearly a relational one. Eakin has said of *Patrimony* that it is “a relational life modelling a relational concept of identity.”⁷³ *Patrimony* exemplifies how the subject experiences identity as relational and intertwined. While Herman Roth may be the central protagonist of the narrative, implicit in this narrative is the self-representation of the narrator as Roth describes

⁷⁰ Paula R. Backscheider, *Reflections on Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3.

⁷¹ Robert Pinsky, “Letting Go”, *The New York Times* and Rodger Kamenetz, “The Hocker, Misnomer. . . Love / Dad”, review of *The Counterlife, The Facts, Deception, and Patrimony*, by Philip Roth. *Southern Review* 24.4, (Autumn 1991), 937-45.

<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=9610120633&site=ehost-live>> [accessed September 2009].

⁷² Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, 181.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 182.

how their lives had become “intermeshed and spookily interchangeable” (*PTS*, 225). This interchangeability also entailed a shift in their identity roles, as Roth found himself playing parent to his father: “I am fifty-five, he is almost eighty-seven, and the year is 1988: “‘Do as I say,’ —I tell him and he does it. The end of one era, the dawn of another” (*PTS*, 83). As Roth becomes “like a mother” (*PTS*, 181) to Herman he gets to witness the betrayal of the body as it succumbs to illness and ageing. Carrying his father’s dentures in his pocket, helping him bathe and cleaning up after he has “beshat” (*PTS*, 172) himself bring him closer to his father than he had been since he was a boy. These intimacies reveal the actualities of existence. After cleaning up the bathroom Roth comes to the following conclusion: “So *that* was the Patrimony. And not because cleaning it up was symbolic of something else but because it wasn’t, because it was nothing more than the lived reality that it was” (*PTS*, 176).

This lived reality, as Eakin notes, brings Roth “closer to his father’s body; mapping every inch of interpersonal space they share.”⁷⁴ This closeness is further conveyed when Roth, in a scene that evokes the biblical taboo of Ham uncovering his father’s nakedness, observes his father’s penis: “I looked at his penis. I don’t believe I’d seen it since I was a small boy” (*PTS*, 177). As Herman’s corporeal identity is diminishing, his penis, Roth notes, is “the one bodily part that didn’t look at all old” (*PTS*, 177). It is this image of his father’s penis that Roth fixes in his mind to prevent him from becoming “ethereally attenuated as the years went by” (*PTS*, 177). “I looked at it intently,” Roth recalls, “as though for the very first time, and waited on the thoughts. But there weren’t any more, except my reminding myself to fix it in my memory for when he was dead” (*PTS*, 177). Remarking on the significance of this scene, Nancy K. Miller notes how the “father’s penis stands in for the father as a body [...] but also as the father’s law.”⁷⁵ Under this law, Miller continues, “Jews are asked to remember and to not forget,” and “part of what you remember has to do with where you come from. The literal and figurative body.”⁷⁶ Herman’s penis is the site that marks Roth’s creation (“the father who created me” (*PTS*, 177)) but also, through circumcision, where his Jewish identity is physically inscribed. In urging himself to permanently fix this

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁷⁵ Nancy K. Miller, *Bequest and Betrayal: Memoirs of a Parent’s Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 28.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

particular image in his mind, Roth is honouring not only the vital source of his father's body and his own beginning, but also his place in his Jewish lineage. By invoking the biblical taboo of Ham, Roth aligns Ham's uncovering of his father's nakedness with the exposure of the father contained in *Patrimony*. Roth is therefore consciously associating himself with a transgressive act. The memory of his naked father's penis is thus both an act of father-son transgression and an acknowledgement of the writer's "unseemliness" (*PTS*, 237). By invoking Ham, Roth makes it known that he is aware of the risk he is taking in the transgressive content of his writing and the act of betrayal that is implicit in his attempt to represent his father as he remembers him.

This act of betrayal is pertinent to the strange encounter Roth has with the taxi driver before his father is due to undergo a biopsy. This scene operates as a comic interlude, a reprieve from the pressing seriousness prevalent throughout *Patrimony*, and one that reads more like an interjected Rothian fiction reminiscent of the episode in *The Anatomy Lesson* where Zuckerman impersonates a pornographer called Milton Appel.⁷⁷ Here, in similar fashion, Roth takes on the persona of a psychiatrist (demonstrating yet another self-invention) and allows the driver to believe that he is en route to work at the hospital. As if taking his cue from Roth, the rather manic driver immediately assumes the role of patient and begins openly relating the unhappy and abusive relationship he had with his father. He bluntly explains to Roth how at twenty, after years of abuse, he knocked his father's teeth out, adding then that he "didn't go to his funeral even" (*PTS*, 157). Considering this "man-baby" (*PTS*, 158), Roth observes:

He actually did it, I realized, annihilated the father. He is of the primal horde of sons who, as Freud liked to surmise, have it in them to nullify the father by force—who hate and fear him and, after overcoming him, honor him by devouring him. (*PTS*, 159)

Setting himself in contrast to this violent, Tantalitically Oedipal son, Roth admits that he is from a different horde, the kind that "can't throw a punch" (*PTS*, 159). What created conflict and misunderstanding, the "poignant abyss" (*PTS*, 159) in

⁷⁷ Within *The Anatomy Lesson*, Milton Appel is in fact a critic; one notably hostile towards Zuckerman's writing. The character of Appel is thought to be based on the real life figure of Irving Howe whose infamous attack on Roth in *Commentary* mirrors Appel's attack of Zuckerman. See Howe, "Philip Roth Reconsidered", *Commentary*.

Roth's upbringing was not violence, but ironically the very education his father and the fathers of his peers strove to provide for Roth and his generation.

This abyss was unforeseen by the Philip Roth portrayed in *Patrimony*. As he embarked on this educational journey Roth initially hoped that it would bring them closer. In his first year of college he felt like his father's "double", as though he wasn't simply educating himself but simultaneously "delivering [his] father from ignorance as well" (*PTS*, 160). This sense of doubling and meshing, as Eakin observes, is a "further penetration of the territory of the other".⁷⁸ Following a path his father had worked to give him, seals Roth's sense of relational identity:

for many months there was nothing my reasonable self could do to shake off the sense of merging [...] the impassioned, if crazy conviction that I was somehow inhabited by him and quickening his intellect right along with mine. (*PTS*, 160)

It was this education that instigated a division between Roth and his father. "Little did they know," Roth says, "how they were equipping us to leave them isolated and uncomprehending in the face of our forceful babble" (*PTS*, 159). In a variation of the taxi-driver's violent attempt at annihilating his patriarchal lineage, Roth's education (however unforeseen by Roth at the time) instigates an impasse between Roth and his father that eventually serves to distance them. While this distancing is a fundamental process in the development to the emergent self, it can never be fully achieved. The act of distancing, even if that act involves Oedipal murder, can never fully annihilate, either on a genetic or relational level, the patrimonial lineage passed from and between father and son.⁷⁹

The extent to which this is the case is further conveyed when Roth relates the emergency quintuple bypass he was forced to undergo during the period of his father's illness. After experiencing a shortening of breath, Roth later discovers that "virtually every major artery to [his] heart had become eighty to a hundred percent occluded and [he] was not far from a huge heart attack" (*PTS*, 224). During this

⁷⁸ Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, 183.

⁷⁹ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* (New York: Random House, 1969; London: Vintage, 1999). Roth's account of his sense of doubling here is also voiced by Alex Portnoy in *Portnoy's Complaint* where Portnoy says: "To this day our destinies remain scrambled together in my imagination, and there are still too many times when, upon reading in some book a passage that impresses me with its logic or its wisdom, instantly, involuntarily, I think, "If only he could read this. Yes! Read and understand—!" (*PC*, 9). Portnoy, in contrast to Roth's portrayal of a similar emotion in *Patrimony* then declares: "this schmuck, this moron, this Philistine father of mine" (*PC*, 9) again reiterating the distinction between Roth's fictional fathers and sons and his representation of Philip and Herman in *Patrimony*.

frightening confrontation with his own mortality, the narrative conveys how the relational identity experienced between Roth and his father in Roth's youth returns with particular intensity. Roth recalls how this near-fatal experience at a time when Herman himself is actually dying induced an intense sense of merging and doubling with his father: "I realized that never had I been more at one with my father than I was at that moment" (*PTS*, 225). Roth's inclusion of the recollection of his own failing body and his near encounter with death emphasises the palpable anxiety towards the loss of the self which is exhibited throughout the narrative. Given that Roth's near death experience occurs at a time when his father is dying, his bodily collapse can be read as a physical manifestation of the anxiety induced on his sense of self by the approaching death of his father. He feels "transposed, interchangeable with—even a sacrificial proxy for—[his] failing father" (*PTS*, 226).

While in this post-operative state, Roth also experiences another change in his subjectivity. He recalls how, as his newly repaired heart beat inside him, he felt a "delirious maternal joy" (*PTS*, 225); as though his heart, receiving blood from its new artery, was "a tiny infant suckling itself" (*PTS*, 225). "This I thought must be like nursing one's own infant—the strident, drumlike, postoperative heartbeat, was not mine but *its*" (*PTS*, 226). Roth here experiences what can be described as an androgynous sense of self. This experience transcends the divisive aspects of the father/son relationship that preoccupied Roth's younger self. Here his "registers of self and self-experience"⁸⁰ extend beyond the father to include his relationship with his mother, a relationship *as* mother (to his "infant suckling" heart), and by extension a sense of identity that extends to include both male and female aspects of self: "I was as near to being the double of my own nurturing mother [...] I was never a heart patient alone in that bed: I was a family of four" (*PTS*, 226).

Unlike the taxi driver Roth encounters, he is not driven by a compulsion to irrevocably separate himself from his father. He does not wish to lose this sense of relational father-son identity and so refrains from attempts at destroying the paternal bond or displacing the father in his role *as* father. The double representation that *Patrimony* enacts allows for Roth to represent both himself, his father, and the interdependence that exists between these figures. This sensitivity

⁸⁰ Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, xi.

towards his subject matter extends to the form of the novel. The intersubjective structure of *Patrimony*, with its inclusion of words attributed to Herman, coupled with Roth's own writing, gives Roth greater scope to impart and display the extent of their interconnected identities. Herman's death and the subsequent dreams about his father that Roth has, confirm for him that he will always be partially determined by the command of his father, even when his father is no longer living:

At least in my dreams I would live perennially as his little son, with the conscience of a little son, just as he would remain alive there not only as my father but as *the* father, sitting in judgement on whatever I do. (*PTS*, 238)

While Roth may differ vastly from the son who physically annihilates the father, a tension presides over the narrative that is especially conveyed in the anxiety concerning the actual writing of the memoir. Rather than pinpoint this tension as Oedipal in its motivation, as actually belonging to "the primal horde of sons who [...] have it in them to nullify the father by force" (*PTS*, 159), this tension instead arises from an intense anxiety about inadvertently enacting a similar nullification through writing. Roth may differentiate himself from this "primal horde" but the text of *Patrimony* represents an exploration of a father-son relationship that, because of its "unseemly" content, places him at risk to accusations of a similar transgressive act *against* the father. For example, Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky suggests that the text of *Patrimony* can precisely be read as an act of revenge against the father, turning his command to remember into an act of authoring the father "by ironically and vengefully fulfilling his father's admonition to 'not forget anything'".⁸¹ According to Rubin-Dorsky: "In the world of Philip Roth, the man of greater imagination always wins [...] so Philip emerges victorious in *Patrimony* through an assertion of absolute narrative control."⁸² Similarly, Hana Writh-Nesher suggests that the text is "an exercise in power over the father who had always wielded authority of him [Roth]".⁸³ Anxiety towards the belief that this may in fact be the case is confirmed by Roth in the suggestion of transgression implied in his use of the term "unseemliness" (*PTS*, 237). Roth posits

⁸¹ Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky, "Honor thy Father", review of *Patrimony* by Philip Roth. *Raritan* 11.4, (Spring 1992).
<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=9707311153&site=ehost-live>> [accessed October 2009].

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Hana Writh-Nesher, "Roth's autobiographical writings", *The Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth*, Timothy Parrish ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 166.

his writing as an act of potential transgression; a defiance of “the father” that is contrary to both his intension and his aim throughout the novel. In literally “authoring” the father Roth is not seeking to “nullify” Herman, but rather carrying out a command of the father in obeying what is presented to the reader as his father’s last wishes.

“You must not forget anything” (*PTS*, 238) is the closing line of *Patrimony*, a line that seems to justify the extent of Roth’s representation throughout the text. Roth’s *Patrimony* is obeying this command to remember and *Patrimony* thus represents not Herman the father, per se, but Herman Roth *through* Philip Roth. *Patrimony* is a text narrated by a son in the act of remembrance, an act that is at the same time, given Roth’s profession, an act of creation: “I must remember accurately, [...] remember everything accurately so that when he is gone I can re-create the father who created me” (*PTS*, 177). The Herman Roth of *Patrimony* is thus the culmination of a concerted act of re-creation. Herman is a figure constructed not in and of himself alone but through his son Philip Roth. The narrative centers on what is often overlooked in the line “re-create the father who created me.” The sentence is qualified through the clause “who created me.” The father within *Patrimony* is thus qualified by his relational status *as* a father to Philip Roth, and more precisely as the figure Roth believes has played the role of father to Philip Roth, the son of Herman Roth.

Patrimony, and the double representation that it enacts, is an attempt to keep the finality of death at bay. Near the beginning of the memoir Roth recalls how, en route to deliver the bad news of the brain tumour to his father, he accidentally ends up at the cemetery in which his mother was buried “seven years before” (*PTS*, 19). Compelled to “bow to [the] impelling force” of the accident that brought him there, he decides to stay and visit her grave. Significantly the “impelling force” that leads Roth to the cemetery highlights an implacable difference between the mode of representation at work in *Patrimony* and that evident in *The Facts*. The inclusion of this diversion more acutely reflects the techniques of fiction. It is a convenient strategy that allows Roth to make literary allusions which, because of their thematic relevance, merit inclusion in the text. The graveyard and the command to remember put the reader in mind of the similar scene in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and the similar meditation on death dramatised there. The pictures that Roth receives of Herman’s MRI scan he equates with

Hamlet holding Yorick's skull: "Had it been the MRI of Yorick's brain that Hamlet had been looking at, even he might have been speechless" (*PTS*, 130). In another reference to *Hamlet*, Roth states that "Maybe the impact wasn't quite what it would have been had I been holding that brain in the palms of my hands, but it was along those lines" (*PTS*, 17). Roth's use of symbolism and literary allusions in the text is a cogent reminder of how he uses techniques of fiction that were pointedly absent from *The Facts*. The shaving mug, the tefillin, the shit, all at various stages symbolise the patrimony that the title refers to.

Confronted with the physical reality of the cemetery, Roth is "reminded of just how banal [our] thinking [on death] is" (*PTS*, 21). He concludes that, although one can remember what the dead were like, "nothing is altered by these recollections, except that the dead seem even more distant and out of reach" (*PTS*, 21). What cemeteries prove, to Roth, "is not that the dead are present but that they are gone" (*PTS*, 21). This graveyard journey and the motif of cemetery pilgrimages have become notable tropes of Roth's fiction, particularly in the later works such as *Everyman* and *Sabbath's Theater*, where anxiety about the loss of self comes to be a theme of pressing concern. Everyman, like the Philip Roth of *Patrimony*, goes to visit the grave of his parents while Sabbath goes to buy his plot. Roth even went so far as to culminate Zuckerman's "Anatomy Lesson" in a visit to a cemetery where, in a drug-induced temper he falls and breaks his jaw on a cemetery headstone.

Although Roth concedes that the finality the cemetery signifies is "fundamental" and "easily grasped" (*PTS*, 21), the text of *Patrimony*, and the intricate portrayal of self and selves that it portrays, testifies to the need to inscribe the self into some lasting form. While the cemetery may hold little of this permanency for Roth, the narrative of *Patrimony* enables him to create a voice for absent subjects, once again bringing the self into being. In the case of *Patrimony* this self is both "remembered" and "re-created". In the "remembering" of Herman as father, Roth re-establishes him in his own life and counteracts the threat to the self inherent in any father-son relationship imposed by the loss of the father. The contradiction embedded in the terms remembrance and re-creation is self-evident. Roth's use of these two terms in relation to his father is indicative of the fact that, as a novelist, these concepts are inextricably linked: "remember accurately, [...] remember everything [...] so that [...] I can re-create the father" (*PTS*, 177). The

text of *Patrimony* reconfirms Roth's assertion in *The Facts* that "Memories of the past are not memories of facts but memories of your imagining of the facts" (*TF*, 8). By acknowledging that representation can only be a variant of re-creation (invention and, by association, fiction) Roth's choice to represent the father not as an autonomous figure, but as a father self-consciously *mediated* through the son gives the text of *Patrimony* a validity that can not be discounted by the "unseemliness" (*PTS*, 237) of some of its contents.

Identifying Roth's examination of autobiography through his varying representations of the self in *My Life as a Man*, *The Facts*, and *Patrimony*, challenges our thinking towards conventional narrative modes that claim to stand in for the self and truthfully represent the reality of the subject. Roth's approach to self-representation and how it functions when it is explicitly declared as such illustrates the way in which Roth first queries, and then rethinks autobiography; embedding pressing questions about the written self into the theme of his narratives throughout these three novels. By depicting the problems that occur when the writer refuses to acknowledge the manifold transformations that take place between "the written and unwritten world" (*RMAO*, xiii). *My Life as a Man* illustrates how invention is tantamount to any attempt to represent the self through narrative. *The Facts*, a text that conforms in its central narrative to the Lejeunian autobiographical contract, queries the assumption that autobiography is a more authentic, truer account of the self than fiction by positing the hypothesis that autobiography is controlled or comes our way through an act of construction that is no different to the fictional process. Finally, *Patrimony* again shows the inadequacies of adhering to, or being expected as a novelist to adhere to, the Lejeunian concept of autobiography, by showing that the experience of identity is relational. In a direct undermining of Lejeune, Roth illustrates that the self can validly be conveyed through the representation of an other.

The following chapter will move away from Roth's explicit, and more straightforward, engagements with the act of writing the self and turn to examine *Deception* and *Operation Shylock* as two texts that take Roth's experimentation with the written self to a new level of complexity. Chapter Two explores the way in which Roth problematises his concept of impersonation and considers the narrative methods by which he examines the fragile and unstable nature of identity from which the continuous reinvention of the self arises. Through a consideration

and analysis of *Operation Shylock* and *Deception* the chapter will explore the ambiguous relationship between narrative construction and self-identity.

Chapter Two

“Are you writing a book?”: *Deception* and *Operation Shylock*

I. *Deception: a Novel*

i) “No one would believe it” (*D*, 202)

In 1990, Philip Roth published *Deception: a Novel*. The subtitle specifies that we are about to read “a Novel”, but beyond the title page *Deception* bears little resemblance to the “novel” form suggested by the subtitle.⁸⁴ Here Roth once again makes use of his “Philip Roth” persona. This time, however, he takes it a step further than before by naming “himself” as the protagonist of a work *explicitly* characterised as fiction. “Nathan Zuckerman,” the figure previously identified as Roth’s fictional self is here replaced with “Philip”; who will in turn be replaced by the “Philip Roth” of *Patrimony* and the “Philip Roth” of *Operation Shylock*.⁸⁵ Comprising solely of interwoven dialogue, the reader of *Deception* is presented with voices bereft of sequence or gender within a text whose primary concern appears to be the construction of a novel whose title we are not given. As Brian D. Johnson observes, *Deception* is presented without “a phrase of exposition or attribution, without a single ‘he said’ or ‘she said’—just bare naked talk”.⁸⁶ Commenting on this “bare naked talk” in her review of *Deception*, Fay Weldon identifies the challenge it sets for the reader: “Male, female? Who’s talking anyway? Do I have to go back yet again and count up—he, she, he, she—to find out? Why doesn’t this author turn up and help?”⁸⁷ In the absence of such authorial

⁸⁴ The first edition of *Deception* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1990) originally carried this subtitle but it is important to note that it does not appear in subsequent editions and reprints of the novel. This chapter will discuss the novel in relation to this title as it appeared in its original publication.

⁸⁵ For purposes of clarity the “Philip” and “Philip Roth” character/narrator of *Deception* and *Operation Shylock* will be referred to throughout as “Philip”, while Roth will be taken to refer to Philip Roth, author of the text.

⁸⁶ Brian D. Johnson, “Intimate Affairs”, *Conversations with Philip Roth*, George J. Searles ed., (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1992), 254.

⁸⁷ Fay Weldon, “Talk Before Sex and Talk After Sex”, review of *Deception* by Philip Roth, *The New York Times*, 11 March 1990. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1990/03/11/books/talk-before-sex-and-talk-after-sex.html>> [accessed July 2008].

guidance, if the reader does not wish to lose track of who is whom, who is speaking, who is being spoken to, and who is being spoken of, they must gender the speaking voices of *Deception*, chart, and remember the sequence of the dialogue. In addition, the work whose construction is alluded to throughout *Deception* has, in fact, already been written; and written, as it turns out, by Philip Roth. As Margaret Smith notes, the reader is thus “deliberately coerced to associate the identity of the narrator, [...] with that of the perceived Philip Roth who exists outside the fiction.”⁸⁸

Although the name of the novel in progress is never explicitly stated, the reader familiar with Roth’s work will be in no doubt that the novel the “Philip” of *Deception* is writing is *The Counterlife*. *The Counterlife* (1986) pre-dates *Deception* in terms of publication. In *Deception* Roth successfully interlinks these works in a reverse chronology, positing *Deception* as the working notebook to *The Counterlife*. In making “Philip” and his lover the blueprints for the characters of Nathan Zuckerman and Maria Freshfield as they appear in *The Counterlife*, *Deception* is Roth’s most determined exploration of the methods employed by the novelist to transform experience into fiction. As David Brauner notes “*Deception* is a novel that consistently advertises its proximity to autobiography,”⁸⁹ deliberately demonstrating that:

the written and unwritten worlds may not be so much alternative universes, existing in parallel realities, as organisms symbiotically linked, in a dynamic but mutually dependent relationship to each other.⁹⁰

Because of the complexity of *Deception*, a brief summary will be provided which will serve to prevent the confusion that can arise during an analysis of the text.

In *Deception*, an American-Jewish writer named “Philip” occupies an apartment in Notting Hill Gate, London. He is visited by an unhappily married English woman (who remains unnamed throughout the text), with whom he is conducting an affair. The central narrative of *Deception* consists of a transcript of conversations that pass between “Philip” and his English lover. These conversations are tempered with the knowledge that “Philip” is at work on his latest novel. Within the time frame of *Deception* this unnamed novel will

⁸⁸ Margaret Smith, “Autobiography: False Confession?”, *Turning Up the Flame: Philip Roth’s Later Novels*, Halio, Jay L. and Ben Siegel eds., (Newark: University Press of Delaware, 2005), 102.

⁸⁹ David Brauner, *Philip Roth*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 85.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 86.

eventually be published. The reader infers this novel to be *The Counterlife*, a work already published by Philip Roth, as stated above. *Deception* is thematically layered, a layering which is reflected in the text's fragmented structure as "Philip's" conversations with his lover cover a range of topics: failing marriages, marital infidelity, anti-Semitism, national and ethnic identities, and the theme of cultural displacement. "Philip" and the woman also discuss the ethical implications of transforming experience into fiction and engage in "Philip's" game of "reality-shift" (*D*, 62). The lovers' conversations and games, pre and post-coitus, are interrupted by a series of sectional dialogues "Philip" conducts with several other people: an ex-lover who is suffering from cancer, an ex-student (and former lover) who has suffered mental illness and received electric shock therapy, a Polish woman, two Czech women, a Czech man, and "Philip's" wife.

The penultimate section of the book consists of the discovery of a notebook by "Philip's" wife. This notebook is *Deception*, the very text the reader has in their hands. The notebook contains the transcript of "Philip's" love affair and in its discovery, "Philip's" wife thus believes she has uncovered evidence of "Philip's" infidelity. An argument ensues about the contents of the notebook. "Philip's" wife suggests that the conversations written there are real: "this is *the real woman!*" (*D*, 176) "Philip" defends his notebook, and by extension defends *Deception*, by claiming that irrespective of the seeming factual or biographical suggestions in his work, it is entirely fiction. The conversation ends with "Philip" telling his wife that the woman he has engaged with in the notebook, the woman he has been conversing with throughout *Deception*, is "words—and try as I will, I cannot fuck words!" (*D*, 186) The final section of *Deception* consists of a phone conversation between "Philip" and the woman he claimed was only "words," thus serving to contradict his earlier statement. By now the novel "Philip" had been working on throughout has been published (as *The Counterlife*). *Deception* ends with the assertion that were "Philip" to attempt to tell the "strange story" of his life with his lover "No one would believe it" (*D*, 202). This statement is a fitting comment on a text titled *Deception*; a text that demands but at the same time evades any attempt on the part of the reader to ascertain the believable from that which is just "words" (*D*, 186).

Reviewing *Deception* Gabriele Annan notes that “in some ways this novel is an act of aggression against the reader.”⁹¹ “The reader can’t win,” Annan suggests, because *Deception* is “a reader-proof novel.”⁹² Immersed in such an intricate structure the reader slowly becomes aware that the title not only refers to the marital infidelity it depicts, but also to the subterfuge it enacts upon the reader. In the penultimate section for example, we discover that the text we have been reading is not, in fact, a novel but is “Philip’s” working notebook to his latest fictional endeavour. This discovery is the metafictional ruse of *Deception*. The book we hold is “Philip’s” notebook yet it is also Roth’s “novel.” By betraying the reader, Roth, in return, offers an insight into how the writing process actually operates as “the narrative strategies of one fiction comments on the fictional process of another”.⁹³ *Deception* then as Annan notes, “like *The Counterlife*, is a novel about novel writing.”⁹⁴ While Christopher Lehmann-Haupt expresses frustration with this, expressing a growing impatience “for the author to stop analyzing his imagination and start exercising it,”⁹⁵ this analyzing is crucial to *Deception* and to the four works (*The Facts*, *Deception*, *Patrimony*, *Operation Shylock*) categorised under the term “Roth Books” which amount to a sustained engagement with and expression of Roth’s “continuing preoccupation with the relationship between the written and the unwritten world” (*RMAO*, xiii).

With *Deception* Roth strips back the novel form to its conception, to a point predating a structured narrative. It is the very tension between the written and the unwritten world that is dramatised here. This is specifically conveyed in the argument between “Philip” and his wife and at several other key points throughout the text. The multitude of layers and varieties of *deceptions* that occur in any attempt to represent selves in fiction emerges as the key thematic concern of *Deception*. Commenting on this layering G. Neelakantan emphasises how the “theme of deception foregrounded in the title of the novel derives from the adulterous relationship of the lovers as well as from the versions of reality that

⁹¹ Gabrielle Annan, “Theme and Variations”, review of *Deception* by Philip Roth. *The New York Review of Books* 37.9, May 31, 1990. < <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/3606> > [accessed July 2008].

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Smith, “Autobiography: False Confession?”, 102.

⁹⁴ Annan, “Theme and Variations”, *The New York Review of Books*.

⁹⁵ Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, “So Is the Hero Really Philip Roth, or Not?”, Books of The Times; Review of *Deception* by Philip, *The New York Times*, 5 March 1990 <<http://www.nytimes.com/1990/03/05/books/books-of-the-times-so-is-the-hero-really-Philip-roth-or-not.html?scp=1&sq=deception&st=nyt>> [accessed July 2008].

ensue when fictions constantly invade reality resulting in its adulteration.”⁹⁶ The extent to which reality is adulterated, however, can never be known. As Richard Tuerk notes, “[p]art of the deception of *Deception* is that it might recall a recounting of actual events, that is, it might, to a large extent, not be deception.”⁹⁷

In its play on the levels of deception and on the identities of not only Philip Roth but figures biographically linked to him (most notably his wife), *Deception* thus raises ethical questions about self-revelation, the extent to which this revelation exposes others, and the extent to which that representation is objectionable.⁹⁸ These are recurring issues in Roth’s writings, as discussed in relation to the texts examined in Chapter One. The concept of “deception” within *Deception* can invariably be linked to the act of impersonation. Impersonation is an act that this thesis continually recognises as key to Roth’s concept and representation of identity. By definition impersonation necessitates a certain degree of deception. The following sections will discuss *Deception*’s intertextual engagement with *The Counterlife*.

i) “I’m misplaced. Totally.” (*D*, 59): *Deception*, *The Counterlife*, and cultural displacement

Throughout *Deception*, Roth uses the dialogue between the lovers to further the sense of cultural displacement that both *Deception* and *The Counterlife* portray. Their final conversation in *Deception* sees “Philip” firmly rooted back in America, where, explaining his sense of belonging, he says “I take long walks in New York, and every once in a while I stop and find myself saying aloud, ‘Home’” (*D*, 198). In contrast, while in England he explains how he felt like he was living in “twelfth-century China” because he “didn’t understand anything” (*D*, 197). Again the text merges with that of *The Counterlife* when the female speaker refers to the scene in the restaurant where Nathan and Maria are subjected to remarks of an anti-Semitic nature: “Our experience with the anti-Semitic woman in the restaurant—all the

⁹⁶ G. Neelakatan, “Textualizing the Self: Adultery, Blatant Fictions, and Jewishness in Philip Roth’s *Deception*”, Halio and Siegel eds. (2005), 64.

⁹⁷ Richard Tuerk, “Caught Between *The Facts* and *Deception*”, Royal ed. (2005), 141.

⁹⁸ In her memoir *Leaving a Doll’s House*, Claire Bloom recalls how she was distraught to discover that Roth was intending to use the name Claire for “Philip’s” wife in *Deception*. Bloom states: “I found the portrait nasty and insulting, and his use of my name completely unacceptable.” When Bloom threatened to pursue “legal means” if necessary, Roth relented and “agreed to remove it from the novel.” Bloom, *Leaving a Doll’s House* (1996; repr., London: Virago, 1997), 201-202.

English reviewers said it was impossible in every detail. [...] They thought it was too much a feat of the imagination" (*D*, 196).

This is a pivotal scene in *The Counterlife*, the novel "Philip" has just published in the timeframe of *Deception*. As the scene unfolds in *The Counterlife*, Zuckerman is enraged to find himself the target of such remarks while Maria tries to play down the situation. The scene exasperates their cultural differences and sets Zuckerman in a rage against English etiquette. After confronting the elderly woman responsible for the remarks, Zuckerman says to Maria, "She looks over here and what does she see? Miscegenation incarnate. A Jew defiling an English rose" (*TC*, 294). Zuckerman explains that he never experienced anti-Semitism like that in America, "I didn't run into this stuff there—ever" (*TC*, 299). Only in England, which he refers to as "Christendom" does he begin to experience a sense of "the wounds that Jews have had to endure" (*TC*, 307). "Here in England" he says, "I was all at once experiencing something I had never personally been bruised by in America. I felt as though gentlest England had suddenly reared up and bit me on the neck" (*TC*, 307).

In *The Counterlife* this scene is the final instigator in Zuckerman's realisation that the gap that exists between him and Maria is too divisive and too culturally ingrained to bridge. The incident forces Maria and Zuckerman into a heated discourse, which sees both attach themselves to certain cultural affinities that they seemed to be beyond when they were safely ensconced in Zuckerman's New York apartment, as conveyed in the "Gloucestershire" section of *The Counterlife*. England makes Zuckerman Jewish in a way he never felt he needed to be, and never felt he was in America. In *Deception* the lovers return to the discussion in a more diluted and less embellished way. "I sort of turned you into a foreigner here [in England]" "Maria" says, "Made you realise that England is not for you" (*D*, 197). While Zuckerman concedes that everything about England made him feel like "an outsider" (*D*, 197), what he missed most was an engagement with Jews. "Maria" jests, "We've got some of them in England, you know." Zuckerman elaborates, "Jews with force, I'm talking about. Jews with appetite. Jews with shame. Complaining Jews who get under your skin. Brash Jews who eat with their elbows on the table" (*D*, 198). Zuckerman admits that in America he has "returned to the bosom of the tribe" (*D*, 199).

Like Zuckerman in *The Counterlife*, “Philip” feels out of place in England. He relates an incident that occurred in Chelsea when he was walking with the writer Aharon Appelfeld and his son. “Philip” describes how they passed two “professional men, nicely dressed in sweaters and slacks” (*D*, 101) who appeared to take issue with “Philip” and his companions. When asked what was bothering them one of the men “gestured at his own clothes and shouted, ‘You don’t even dress right!’” staring at “Philip” “full of fury” (*D*, 102). “And then,” “Philip” explains, “I knew for certain what it was” (*D*, 103). “Philip” describes how, besides his beard and spectacles, he was almost identically dressed to this gentleman and this was the source of the man’s ire:

The reason my clothes just like his were wrong was *because* they were just like his. What with my beard and my hat and my gesticulations I should have been wearing a caftan and a black felt hat. I should have been wrapped in a prayer shawl. I shouldn’t have been in clothes like his *at all*. (*D*, 104)

“Philip’s” encounter here recalls Eli Peck’s encounter with his double in Roth’s short story, “Eli, the Fanatic.”⁹⁹ In the story Eli is forced to confront his Jewish identity when Jewish Holocaust refugees set up a yeshiva in the suburban town of Woodenton. Eli, in his capacity as attorney, is sent to the yeshiva to inform them that they are breaking the town’s zoning laws, in the hope that this will be enough to force them to move somewhere else. While there however, Eli instead attempts to negotiate a compromise. He tries to explain to Leo Tzuref, the headmaster of the yeshiva, that what the people of the town find most disturbing is the particular attire of “the gentleman in the black hat, suit etc” (*GC*, 242). Eli tries to convince Tzuref to assimilate, primarily by having the orthodox Jew or the “greenhorn” (*GC*, 236), as the local community refers to him, dress “in a manner appropriate to the time and place” (*GC*, 242). When Tzuref explains that the “suit the gentleman wears is all he’s got” (*GC*, 243), Eli initially misses his meaning, supposing that it is a case of not being able to afford a new one. “I misunderstood” he says, to which Tzuref replies “No news reached Woodenton?” (*GC*, 245)

This misunderstanding is symptomatic of Eli’s disassociation from the Jews of the yeshiva. While he may be willing to be part of his assimilated community (“I am them, they are me” (*GC*, 245)), he is ultimately unhinged by Tzuref’s retort

⁹⁹ Roth, “Eli the Fanatic”, *Goodbye, Columbus and five short stories* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959; London: Penguin, 1986), 229-76.

“You are us, we are you!” (GC, 245) and is forced into a jousting exchange until he frustratingly declares, “I am me. They are them. You are you.”(GC, 245). The story, however, overrides Eli’s confidence in this as he ends up donning the attire of the orthodox Jew and inhabiting the place of the “greenhorn”. In a direct reversal of the complaint issued in “Eli the Fanatic,” the confrontation portrayed in *Deception* is caused by the eradication of difference and the threat of sameness implied by “Philip’s” clothes in the mind of the anti-Semitic man he encounters. Significantly, “Philip” retaliates by putting emphasis not on his ethnicity, but on his American identity, as in his “best American accent” he tells the English gentleman “go fuck yourself” (D, 103).

What surprises “Philip” even more so in relation to this confrontation, is the failure of others to recognise or admit that it was anti-Semitism that drove the man to say what he did. “I tell you” “Philip” says to his lover, “never have I felt more misplaced in *any* country than I did listening to all these intelligent people going on and on denying what was staring them in the face” (D, 105). “Philip” suggests that it is an English commonplace to ask “Oh, why do you Jews make such a fuss about being Jewish?” (D, 106) “Philip”, as the “author” of *The Counterlife*, attributes these very words to Maria after the anti-Semitic scene in the restaurant and it is one of the remarks that instigate the dissolution of their marriage. Furthermore, the question of Israel becomes a talking point for the lovers in *Deception* as “Philip” tries to understand English attitudes towards Jews. “Why does everybody around here hate Israel so much?” (D, 79) and “Do you think Jews in England try harder?” (D, 35) are questions “Philip” puts to his lover trying to tease out an English psychology which he cannot understand. “Really, your picture of the English is very different than mine” (D, 35) he tells her and later admits that being a “Jew and being an American” was something he’d “forgotten about” until he “moved to England and started attending smart dinner parties” (D, 84).

These themes of cultural displacement are reflected in the conversations that interrupt the central dialogue. “Philip” speaks with a Czech woman in London whom he met ten years ago in Prague. She talks about her life in the interim years and tells him tales of coercion and harassment involving the Czechoslovakian Secret Service and American Intelligence; events that eventually force her to leave her country. She talks of a failed marriage to an Englishman who didn’t understand her or her sense of cultural displacement, and of her alienation amongst the class

determined society she found herself surrounded by in England. In England she felt removed from people who would otherwise have recognised her as an intellectual equal. "Because I was educated," she tells "Philip", "I more belong to the class that I don't have the money to be in" (*D*, 59). This woman shares many of "Philip's" concerns regarding the sincerity of English etiquette as she recalls how she was discriminated against because of her foreign accent: "English people, [...] they are so polite, but just when I would open my mouth and they would hear my foreign accent, I had no chance" (*D*, 56). The cultural differences confound her and leave her with a sense of alienation as she confides to "Philip", "I'm misplaced. Totally" (*D*, 59).

Similar anxieties are explored in "Philip's" conversations with a Polish woman. She tells "Philip" of how her family suffered under Communist rule and how she lost her faith in the Catholic Church because she thought it was responsible for the country's dire economic and political situation. While she is "desperate" about her country's predicament, she cannot find a way to make it better because the "Polish underground" (*D*, 165) is mainly Catholic. She tells "Philip" that she cannot "find a place" (*D*, 165) for herself. In London she is further dismayed and disoriented. This condition is literalised in the retelling of her experience at Charing Cross station as she recalls how she couldn't find her correct platform because she couldn't read the information board: "there was a board – there were all sorts of signs and I couldn't find the solutions to the signs" (*D*, 167). At night, in her free time, she spends her time translating, turning signs into meaning in order to make her life more significant (*D*, 169).

The search for significance is a recurring theme of the novel and prevalent in another conversation "Philip" has with a Czech woman who fled Czechoslovakia for America after the Russian occupation in 1968. This woman recalls her American life and the varied path that led her to becoming a sort of high class prostitute. "My life was quite meaningless," she tells "Philip", "but it was always better than to marry poor man, live in Brooklyn, and have three children" (*D*, 31). She recalls how, eventually, this meaningless existence took its toll and she ended up in hospital with "emotional illness" (*D*, 32). To "Philip's" question "And what are you asking from me?" she replies, "I am looking for someone who will read and help me with my book" (*D*, 33). This need to formulate experience in narrative is symptomatic of the misplaced women with whom "Philip" converses

throughout *Deception*. Ivan, another political refugee, puts it succinctly when he says “They have not been able to gain access to their stories and in the telling of their story there is a kind of compulsion to complete the life” (*D*, 90). Ivan accuses “Philip” of manipulating this “you listen and rush to write it down and then you ruin it with your rotten fictionalizing” (*D*, 90). However, his accusations ironically reiterate the importance of story for sustaining a coherent sense of self: “They try to fill with their words the enormous chasm between the act itself and the narrativizing of it” (*D*, 90). As Ivan emphasises, these women are often suffering from “post-traumatic shock” and “struggle for access to their story” (*D*, 89).

Roth’s interest in this struggle has often been a prevalent feature of his work. In 1973 he became General Editor of Penguin’s “Writers from the other Europe” series. This series aimed to introduce writers such as Ivan Klíma, Bruno Schulz, Jerzy Andrzejewski and Milan Kundera to American readers. Roth took a keen interest in writers who had been suppressed or blacklisted under Soviet rule. In the 1970s, over a five year period, he travelled to Prague each spring and conversed with writers who were up against forces unknown to him as a writer. Of his experience in Prague he comments:

I met a lot of writers there, saw something of their misery, and saw very sharply the contrast to my own writing life. The gap was enormous between my professional opportunities and theirs, between the place my work and their work has in society, between the pressures crushing them and those impinging on me. All this got me thinking about a book.¹⁰⁰

The book is *The Prague Orgy* (1985), which serves as the epilogue to the *Zuckerman Bound* trilogy. Roth suggests that the “tension between license and restraint,” a theme which he uses to describe his work, is particularly dramatised in *The Prague Orgy*. In the novel Zuckerman discovers in Prague “a prison like none that’s ever confined him. In Prague, being bound and unbound takes on an entirely new meaning.”¹⁰¹ In *The Prague Orgy*, Zuckerman is submerged in a world of paranoia and suspicion, unable to decipher the characters he meets. He has gone there at the request of Sisovsky, an exiled writer, on the basis of retrieving his father’s stories. While there, Zuckerman observes how stories are carried with a

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in Mervyn Rothstein, “The Unbounded Spirit of Philip Roth”, *The New York Times*, 1 August 1985. < <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/10/11/specials/roth-unbounded.html> > [accessed June 2008].

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

sense of burden. Eva Kalinova, a renowned Czech actress and Sisovsky's mistress, despairingly declares: "I cannot hear my ridiculous story! I cannot hear *your* ridiculous story! I am sick and tired of hearing our story, I am sick and tired of *having* our story!"¹⁰² Yet stories are all Zuckerman finds and he quickly becomes enmeshed in their narratives. In Prague, he finds the storification of life to be complete:

In Prague, stories aren't simply stories; it's what they have instead of life. Here they have become their stories, in lieu of being permitted to be anything else. Storytelling is the form their resistance has taken against the coercion of the powers-that-be. (*PO*, 68)

Here, story is seen as a means of retaining authority of the self in the face of a repressive regime. While briefly experiencing that oppression, Zuckerman fears himself shedding his own story. Amidst "these clownish forms of human despair" he asserts, he could sense himself "snaking away from the narrative encasing [him]" (*PO*, 86-87). Zuckerman's Prague experience, his sense of being used for the purposes of someone else's story, leaves him with a feeling of "extraneous irrelevancy" (*PO*, 87). As if to reaffirm a sense of purposeful existence, he embraces the affirmation to be found in embracing the story of the self:

No, one's story isn't a skin to be shed—it's inescapable, one's body and blood. You go on pumping it out till you die, the story veined with the themes of your life, the ever-recurring story that's at once your invention and the invention of you. (*PO*, 87-88)

As this thesis has been arguing, the concept of the "walking text" is shown to be "inescapable" and vital to the presentation of character, and to the concept of self found within Roth's oeuvre. The storied self sustains itself through its "ever-recurring" narrative that *is* the self and simultaneously the "invention" of that self.

ii) "For all I know I *am* beginning with the ending" (*RMAO*, 120)

When asked, in an interview with Hermione Lee, "*Must you have a beginning? Would you ever begin with an ending?*", Roth replied "For all I know I

¹⁰² Roth, *The Prague Orgy* (London: Vintage, 1995), 18.

am beginning with the ending” (*RMAO*, 120). This statement can be read as a fitting commentary to the text of *Deception* and the apparent intertextual meshing that links it to *The Counterlife*. In theme and content, *Deception* brings the reader back to the “Gloucestershire” section of *The Counterlife* where Nathan meets and begins a relationship with Maria Freshfield. In both texts the lovers discuss their anxieties about their relationship. They also discuss the process of writing and the ethical implications of using friends, family, and lovers, as source material; a theme that *Patrimony*, as discussed in Chapter One, also problematized. In *The Counterlife* Maria voices her reservations about becoming intimately involved with a novelist: “I know you’re not to be trusted. Are you writing a book?” (*TC*, 190) While Nathan suggests that the subject of a writer’s discretion is “boring” (*TC*, 191), Maria insists “You’re not, at any rate to write about me. Notes are okay, because I know I can’t stop you taking notes. But you’re not to go all the way” (*TC*, 191).

With *Deception* what the reader seems to get, among other narratives, is the transcript of these notes and by the novel’s end, the revelation, however imaginary it may be, that “Philip” did in fact go all the way in creating Maria out of his English lover. “[I]t’s pretty much you,” (*D*, 192) “Philip” concedes. In *Deception*, “Philip’s” lover voices her dismay about this unscrupulous nature of the novelist. Expressing her anger at the betrayal she tells “Philip”:

You know that I object greatly to writing down exactly what people said. I object greatly to this taking people’s lives and putting them into fiction. And then being a famous author who resents critics for saying that he doesn’t make things up. (*D*, 200)

A similar objection is voiced in *The Counterlife* by Henry, Nathan Zuckerman’s brother, when he discovers that he is the subject of Nathan’s manuscript. On discovering the work, Henry notes:

all the blood relatives of an articulate artist are in a very strange bind, not only because they find that they are “material,” but because their own material is always articulated for them by someone else who, in his voracious, voyeuristic using-up of all their lives, gets there first but doesn’t always get it right. (*TC*, 205)

Here Henry voices the same frustrations as Tarnopol in *My Life as a Man* when he rejected Dr. Spielvogel’s reading of his character, as discussed in Chapter One. In

Deception “Philip’s” English lover questions him about the effect of *The Counterlife* on his wife, and suggests how the novel contradicts his attempts to keep his infidelity from her:

if I was in your wife’s position I’d know immediately that he’d been consumed by somebody else for a very long time [...] All the deformities imposed on our time together were pointless, because you’d done this anyway. (*D*, 194)

“This” refers to the exposure of the affair. Despite his protestations that the notebook is simply “the story of an *imagination* in love” (*D*, 183), we are encouraged by the inclusion of this conversation between “Philip” and his lover at the end of *Deception*, to believe that the charges made by “Philip’s” wife were in fact justified. “Philip” discounted the veracity of the contents of this notebook (*Deception*) by stating: “I have been imagining myself, outside of my novel, having a love affair with a character inside my novel” (*D*, 176). The notebook, “Philip” explains, is “*far* from myself—it’s play, it’s a game, it is an *impersonation* of myself! Me ventriloquizing myself” (*D*, 184). Simultaneously, he argues that conflating his identity with that of the protagonist is what challenges him as a writer:

I portray myself as implicated because it is not enough just to be present [...] To compromise some “character” doesn’t get me where I want to be. What heats things up is compromising me. (*D*, 177)

This line seems to read as a direct refutation to critics who condemn Roth for portraying his biography in an untransformed manner. The following quote, seven pages later in their argument, is an undeniably provocative engagement with these critics as Roth targets an accusation that has dogged his career, and anticipates the inevitable conclusions to be drawn by such critics when they encounter this very novel: “I write fiction and I’m told its autobiography, I write autobiography and I’m told it’s fiction, so since I’m so dim and they’re so smart let *them* decide what it is or isn’t” (*D*, 184). Pre-empting the sentiments put forth in *Patrimony* he tells his wife, “I cannot and do not live in the world of discretion, not as a writer anyway” (*D*, 1841).

However, this final section seems to make clear to the reader that this speaking woman was in fact the model for a character in the published novel: “It was you” (*D*, 195). “Philip’s” wife’s assertion that “this is the *model* for that

woman, this is *the real woman!*" (D, 176) A connection is thus insinuated between the female character of the unnamed novel-in-progress and "Philip's" lover throughout *Deception*. The reader knows this novel to be *The Counterlife* and the character to be Maria Freshfield. The text of *Deception* thus purports to link this woman, who may or may not be "real," to a female character within a work of fiction. In an ironic turn of events, the woman identified by "Philip" to his wife as just "words" now encounters her fictional self as "words" within the pages of "Philip's" finished novel. Unless of course this final suggestion is itself another deception and this conversation is merely another transcript, in another notebook; as suggested by the term "Laughing" in the following excerpt of dialogue:

'I may do another about you.'

'You wouldn't. You're not. You aren't, are you?'

Laughing. 'Yes, of course I will. This will be part of it.' (D, 202)

In *The Counterlife* then, both Henry Zuckerman and Maria Freshfield can only stand by while they become the basis for fictional characters. Henry Zuckerman found "himself" in his brother's manuscript. Similarly, the woman in *Deception* recognises "herself" as Maria Freshfield: "I don't think Freshfield was at all a good name for me" (D, 196). The extent to which she has become a fictional being is emphasised in *Deception* when "Philip's" lover remarks on what she identifies to be her symbolic meaning in *The Counterlife*: "it's England that I sort of stand for. Isn't it?" (D, 197) and again when she concedes to "Philip's" portrayal of her: "I was astonished to see this character so terribly passive. I had simply no idea. Insofar as it's me ..." (D, 192). However, she does make some attempt to assert her referential status when, in response to "Philip's" declaration that he invented her, "As I made you up, you *never* existed" (D, 200), she retorts "Then who was that in your studio with my legs over your shoulders? Please, no more of this highbrow nonsense" (D, 200). She also threatens him with the idea of writing her own book about "kissing and telling" (D, 200) to which he responds "charge ahead." (D, 199) For "Philip", reality is there to be transformed into fiction.

II. A Novel Confession: *Operation Shylock* and the Lie of Fiction

i) "I have nothing to confess"¹⁰³

Published in 1993, *Operation Shylock*, subtitled "a confession", begins with a preface attesting to the autobiographical premise of the book: "I've drawn *Operation Shylock* from notebook journals. The book is as accurate an account as I am able to give of actual occurrences that I lived through."¹⁰⁴ Similar to Roth's attestations towards "autobiography" in *The Facts* (1987), *Operation Shylock* appears to contradict Roth's statement in his 1981 interview with *Le Nouvel Observateur* where, when asked if his books should be read "as confession, as autobiography barely disguised", Roth told the journalist "You should read my books as fiction," and "I have nothing to confess and no one I want to confess to."¹⁰⁵ The text uses details that correlate to the biographical life of Philip Roth and incorporates factually verifiable events into the drama of the novel. It is further complicated by the fact that Roth stressed the veracity of its contents from its inception. During the book's promotion Roth consistently affirmed that *Operation Shylock* was not a novel but a confession, and that the events relayed in the narrative were true. In an article written by Roth for the *New York Times* Roth vouched for the veracity of the work¹⁰⁶ and in interview with Esther B. Fein, Roth declared:

I'm not trying to confuse you. Look, let me tell you something that a lot of people have trouble believing. This happened. I stepped into a strange hole, which I don't understand to this day [...] But I can tell you that, in substance, this happened.¹⁰⁷

The preface of *Operation Shylock* informs us that some "details of identification and locale" (*OS*, 13) have been changed for legal reasons but the reader is otherwise encouraged to consider the narrative as a factual work and

¹⁰³ Roth, "Interview with *Le Nouvel Observateur*", *Reading Myself and Others*, 100.

¹⁰⁴ Roth, *Operation Shylock: a Confession* (1993; repr., London: Vintage, 2000), 13.

¹⁰⁵ Roth, "Interview with *Le Nouvel Observateur*", *Reading Myself and Others*, 100.

¹⁰⁶ Roth, "A Bit of Jewish Mischief", *The New York Times*, 9 March 1993.

<<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/10/11/specials/roth-mischief.html>> [accessed September 2008].

¹⁰⁷ Roth, "Roth Sees Double. And Maybe Triple, Too", Interview by Esther B. Fein. *The New York Times*, 9 March 1993. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1993/03/09/books/Philip-roth-sees-double-and-maybe-triple-too.html?pagewanted=all>> [accessed June 2008].

identify the “Philip Roth” of *Operation Shylock* with the Philip Roth who authored it. The book itself, despite Roth’s best efforts to have it categorised as an autobiographical text, is marketed as “Fiction” (*OS*, spine). According to Harold Bloom “by narrowing the gap between author and protagonist (though the gap is certainly, as it has to be, still there), Roth the novelist has been able to create his most vivid character.”¹⁰⁸ For Bloom the “Philip Roth” character of *Operation Shylock* is “fiercely comic, exuberant, stubbornly reasonable and unreasonably stubborn, lucid *in extremis*, above all immensely curious, about others as well as about himself.”¹⁰⁹ Jonathan Raban, however, objects to the book precisely because he finds Philip Roth to be far too curious about “Philip Roth”. Calling the book “a big untidy box of tricks with smoke and mirrors,”¹¹⁰ Raban suggests that “Roth is not a writer who tires easily of his own brilliance”¹¹¹, detecting in Roth’s portrayal of the “Philip Roth” character a vanity that mars the novel. In contrast to Bloom’s statement that what “fascinates about *Operation Shylock* is the degree of the author’s experimentation in shifting the boundaries between his life and his work”¹¹², Raban suggests that the “the surface of this novel is as slippery and treacherous as Roth can make it” and that Roth has simply “toiled to make it reviewer-proof”.¹¹³

The highly self-conscious post-modern technique of authorial inclusion that Roth avails of here was by the early nineties, a familiar trope of contemporary literature having been experimented with by many of Roth’s contemporaries.¹¹⁴ While “Philip Roth” is named as the protagonist of *Operation Shylock*, and certain

¹⁰⁸ Harold Bloom, “Operation Roth”, review of *Operation Shylock: a Confession* by Philip Roth, *The New York Review of Books* 40.8, (April 1993). < <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2588>> [accessed July 2008].

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Jonathan Raban, “Book Review/ A vanity affair: Philip Roth does not easily tire of his own brilliance. In his new novel he gives us at least two versions of himself”, review of *Operation Shylock* by Philip Roth. *The Independent*, 21 March 1993. < <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/book-review--a-vanity-affair-Philip-roth-does-not-easily-tire-of-his-own-brilliance-in-his-new-novel-he-gives-us-at-least-two-versions-of-himself-1499010.html>> [accessed August 2008].

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² Bloom, “Operation Roth”, *The New York Review of Books*.

¹¹³ Raban, “Book Review/ A vanity affair”, *The Independent*.

¹¹⁴ John Updike’s *The Complete Henry Bech*, (1992; repr., London: Penguin Classics, 2006) Paul Auster’s *The New York Trilogy*, (London: Faber, 1987), Milan Kundera’s *Immortality* (1990; repr., London: Faber and Faber 1999). The technique would also become a prevalent feature of the work of J.M. Coetzee, in particular in his fictionalised memoirs *Boyhood: Scenes from a Provincial Life* (London: Penguin 1997) *Youth: Scenes from a Provincial Life II* (London: Penguin, 2002) and most recently *Summertime Scenes from a Provincial Life III* (London: Harvill Secker, 2009). Coetzee also shares the name of the protagonist in *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007).

events do indeed correspond to his “real-life” counterpart, it would require an immense naivety or gullibility on the part of the reader to accept the contents of *Operation Shylock* as wholly factual. Only a reader unaccustomed to Roth’s playful and subversive modes of representation, techniques introduced and examined in the previous chapter, would link the “Philip” of *Operation Shylock* with the “Roth” that appears on the title page, without first calling into question the sincerity of the claims made towards factual content. Crucially Bloom, unlike Raban, when reviewing the book emphasises the fictional status of the protagonist: “‘Philip Roth’ is [...] Roth’s most vivid character, surpassing Portnoy, Tarnopol, [...] Kepesh, [...] and the long-suffering and charmingly manic Zuckerman.”¹¹⁵

Operation Shylock can thus be said to contradict a claim made by Lejeune in “The autobiographical contract” that when the name of the protagonist equals the name of the author, this “of itself excludes the possibility of fiction,”¹¹⁶ and it thus necessitates that the “author (whose name designates a real person) and narrator are identical” and that the “narrator and protagonist are identical.”¹¹⁷ *Operation Shylock* shows this claim to be redundant as it allows for none of the inherent complexities and paradoxes involved in terms of attempting to represent and write selves. *Operation Shylock*’s engagement with identity takes the form of a trans-Atlantic search for lost, stolen, and mistaken selves. In doing so it questions whether any claim made towards stability of identity can ever be held within anything as binding as a contractual Lejeunian agreement.

From the onset the text defiantly and provocatively pushes generic boundaries as Roth, as “Philip Roth”, takes centre stage as protagonist/narrator. By undermining the attestations towards the “actual” nature of events and identities in the novel, Roth demonstrates the extent to which fact and fiction are interlocking modes of representation as opposed to distinct modes of writing. To briefly surmise, the story begins in New York with a phone call “Philip” receives alerting him to the appearance of a “Philip Roth” impersonator, whom “Philip” later names as Moishe Pipik. Pipik, posing as “Philip Roth” and exploiting his public profile, sets himself up in Israel advocating a political program of “Diasporism” (*OS*, 18) which aims to return Israeli Jews of Ashkenazi descent to their European

¹¹⁵ Bloom, “Operation Roth”, *The New York Review of Books*.

¹¹⁶ Lejeune, “The autobiographical contract”, 210.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 193.

homelands (*OS*, 44). In the novel “Philip” travels to Israel to reclaim his stolen identity. While there he encounters his impostor and meets a series of characters he suspects are either connected to the PLO or The Mossad. *Operation Shylock* ends with “Philip” agreeing to undertake an intelligence-gathering operation (“Operation Shylock”) for the Mossad, the details of which are never disclosed to the reader. To heighten the perplexity, all this, we are told, takes place in the aftermath of a physical and mental breakdown “Philip” suffered following minor knee surgery. The breakdown, previously referred to in *The Facts*, is one of the events of the book that correlates to Roth’s own biography. The series of events that “Philip” becomes embroiled in throughout *Operation Shylock* threaten to completely undo his recovery and return him to the debilitating mental state that left him hopelessly asking, “Where is Philip Roth?” (*OS*, 22).

Operation Shylock is a text that thrives on confusion. Roth provides a multitude of texts and testimonies within this one narrative. While “Philip” is the central narrator, the text is full of warring voices each trying to claim the narrative for their own and impose their “rightful” meaning onto events. These contested and conflicting narratives make up much of the text. The book is consequently made up of a series of interwoven counter-texts, together with “Philip’s” own narrative of events: Pipik’s “A-S.A” (Anti-Semitics Anonymous) “Workout Tape” (*OS*, 253), the Aharon Appelfeld interview (*OS*, 83), the transcripts of the Demjanjuk trial, the Leon Klinghoffer diaries (*OS*, 277), Pipik’s story, Jinx’s story, and “Philip’s” invented letter from Jinx telling the story of Pipik’s death (*OS*, 236). What we don’t have, however, is what the title page of *Operation Shylock* actually promises. The reader is ultimately deprived of the “confession,” as “Philip” chooses to suppress the details of “Operation Shylock”. The inclusion of these texts and narratives disrupt the reader’s sense of what is known and what is uncertain. As David Brauner observes, *Operation Shylock* “explodes what has become (after Baudrillard) something of a truism of contemporary critical discourse: the notion that in our postmodern world what we take to be reality is, in fact, a simulacrum.”¹¹⁸ *Operation Shylock* can in fact be said to deconstruct the apparent boundary that separates the real and the simulacra by showing that both are in operation at the same time. The text parodies the notion that it is possible to

¹¹⁸ Brauner, *Philip Roth* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 92.

distinguish between the real and the simulacra. The parody exists in the very construction of the novel where, as Elaine B. Safer notes, Roth “sets up doubles within the novel and with people outside the novel.”¹¹⁹ This, Safer continues, comically reasserts “postmodern skepticism about identity of the self, about metafictional aspects of calling attention to the story-telling itself, and about the multifaceted views of factual evidence”.¹²⁰ The complexity of the work necessitates that in order to avoid confusion, the novel will be discussed within several demarcated sections that reflect key themes and incidents within the novel.

ii) “So there he was or wasn’t” (*OS*, 65): The trial of John Demjanjuk

The events of *Operation Shylock* are set against the backdrop of the John Demjanjuk trial, the man accused of being the “Ivan the Terrible of Treblinka” (*OS*, 17). This trial of alleged or mistaken identity is prescient to the concerns of the novel. Demjanjuk, the autoworker from Cleveland may or may not be the notorious “Ivan the terrible of Treblinka” (*OS*, 17). “Philip”, a spectator at the trial, is at a loss when it comes to discerning truth in relation to who or what Demjanjuk might be:

So there he was—or wasn’t. I stared and I stared, wondering if, despite all I’d read of the evidence against him, his claim that he was innocent was true; if the survivors who’d identified him could all be lying or wrong (*OS*, 65)

Such speculation is integral to the way in which the novel is read and formed. Indeed the above suppositions mirror those asked by the reader in relation to the absence or presence of Philip Roth the author in this speaking “Philip Roth” character. The characters within *Operation Shylock* are not accessible to the reader beyond “Philip’s” conjecture. Likewise, “Philip” is not accessible to the reader beyond Roth’s conjecture. As Safer also notes, “Roth often imagines a

¹¹⁹ Elaine B. Safer, “Operation Shylock: Double Double Jewish Trouble”, Royal ed. *New Perspectives* (2005), 163.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 160.

consciousness without alerting the reader to its status as conjecture.”¹²¹ The reader is left to discern between that which is certain and that which is merely speculation. Thus the experience of reading *Operation Shylock* can be somewhat disorientating when attempts to locate the consciousness being conveyed are frequently thwarted by the text itself. For example, after a monologue conveying the thoughts of John Demjanjuk’s son, “Philip” suddenly interjects to ask, “Or were *these* not at all like young Demjanjuk’s thoughts?” (*OS*, 295).

Demjanjuk’s trial and the various contested narratives raised by the witnesses illustrates the contestability of laying claim to a stable identity. The fragility of any claim to an authentic identity is made prevalent as competing and contested narratives of Demjanjuk’s identity are brought into collision. That John Demjanjuk could be a generic American citizen but also a brutal guard of a Nazi concentration camp; that “Philip Roth” could be a character, an author but also an impersonated self in Isreal expands a theme central to Roth’s earlier novel, *The Counterlife*. Of the series of conflicting and contradictory narratives in *The Counterlife* Roth asks “Which is real and which is false?” while simultaneously asserting “All are equally real and equally false”¹²²

At the trial, these ideas come to a head with the testimony of Holocaust survivor and key witness for the prosecution, Eliahu Rosenberg. Controversy hinges on a sixty-eight-page report written by Rosenberg in 1945 detailing the fate of the Jews at the Treblinka concentration camp. In that report Rosenberg wrote that “Ivan the Terrible” had been killed during an uprising. Rosenberg subsequently argues that this was not his personal account of events but of events told to him at the time he wrote it. Under cross-examination, struggling to command authority over his versions of events, Rosenberg makes a distinction between wished for versions of events and real versions. When questioned about the discrepancies in his testimony and why he didn’t write down “all these versions” (*OS*, 299) Rosenberg replies, “I preferred to write *this particular version*” (*OS*, 300 emphasis added), explaining that he wrote what he did because at the time he wanted to *believe* that it was true. In similar ways, the text of *Operation Shylock* becomes “Philip’s” written testimony of the events he experiences in Israel and, like Rosenberg’s testimony, it is subject to similar

¹²¹ Ibid., 158.

¹²² Roth, “Interview on Zuckerman”, *Reading Myself and Others*, 161.

questioning and disbelief. “Philip”, aware of the subjective nature of truth, recalls how he urged himself not to write his experience afterwards: “And don’t write about it afterwards”(OS, 215). Like the “true” story alluded to by the lovers in *Deception*, if it is to be written it will not be believed: “No one would believe it” (D, 202).

Where “everything is allegory” (OS, 215), “Philip” fears that he has little chance of persuading the reader that his story really happened:

Even the gullible now have contempt for the idea of objectivity; the latest thing they’ve swallowed whole is that it’s impossible to report anything faithfully other than one’s own temperature. (OS, 215)

Like Rosenberg, all he is left with is his version of events. “[Y]ou can explain these two days for the rest of your life” he laments, “and no one will believe your version to be anything other than your version” (OS, 216). Demjanjuk’s trial operates as a metatextual parody of the process undergone by the reader of *Operation Shylock*. The trial scene is also, as Safer points out, “a tour de force burlesque of the narrator’s role”.¹²³ The text of *Operation Shylock* becomes, both for “Philip” and for Roth, an exercise in producing versions of the self and, in the process, interrogating the extent to which the boundaries of fact and fiction overlap. Roth is seeking a mode of writing that is not subject to the same judicial laws of either Demjanjuk’s trial, or the generic boundaries of Lejeunian autobiography. He seeks a merger of fact and fiction and sees this “faction” as the point of departure for his novels; a concept that will be explored in the following section on Aharon Appelfeld:

Though some readers may have trouble disentangling my life from Zuckerman’s, *The Ghost Writer*— along with the rest of *Zuckerman Bound* and *The Counterlife*—[this category would now include *Operation Shylock*] is an imaginary biography, an invention stimulated by themes in my experience to which I have given considerable thought but the result of a writing process a long way from the methods, let alone the purposes, of autobiography. (RMAO, 150)

iii) Aharon Appelfeld: “The things that are most true are easily falsified” (OS, 86)

¹²³ Safer, “Operation Shylock: Double Double Jewish Trouble”, Royal ed. *New Perspectives* (2005), 160.

Roth's inclusion of the transcript from an interview with Aharon Appelfeld goes some way towards explaining Roth's method in the novel. "Philip" is asking Appelfeld about his book *Tzili* (1983), which is a fictional retelling of Appelfeld's own experience of escape from a Nazi concentration camp. "Philip" wonders why Appelfeld chose to fictionalise the material instead of presenting it as a survivor's tale, comparable to Primo Levi's account of his Auschwitz incarceration in *If This Is a Man*.¹²⁴ Appelfeld responds in a manner that echoes Roth's own thoughts on life-writing:

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 meagre, an unconvincing imaginary tale. The things that are most true are easily falsified. (*OS*, 86)

Appelfeld's analysis recalls Roth's own comments in *The Facts* on how reality is always in some way transformed by putting something into words. Making this reality credible, he suggests, has become the problem of the novelist. Appelfeld, in much the same vein, confirms this belief:

Reality, as you know, is always stronger than the human imagination. Not only that, reality can permit itself to be unbelievable, inexplicable, out of all proportion. The created work, to my regret, cannot permit itself all that. The reality of the Holocaust surpassed any imagination. If I remained true to the facts, no one would believe me. (*OS*, 86)

Constructing stories thus becomes a means of accessing truth and organising memory in order to shape and understand the past. Appelfeld suggests that the imaginative process provides the writer with a "causal explanation, a thread to tie things together" (*OS*, 86) so that the incredulous nature of reality can be represented. The "exceptional" he suggests, is "permissible only if it is part of an overall structure and contributes to an understanding of that subject" (*OS*, 86). This echoes the sentiment conveyed in the opening letter of *The Facts* where Roth discusses the process of memory recall – "you construct a sequence of stories to bind up the facts with a persuasive hypothesis that unravels your history's meaning" (*TF*, 8). Here *The Facts* links the process of fiction-making to that of

¹²⁴ Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man* (London: Abacus, 1987)

autobiography. For Roth, imposing order and sequence on memory is what the act of narration amounts to, both in fiction and in autobiography. The difference, as Appelfeld points out and as Zuckerman explains in *The Facts*, is in credulity or in modes of reading. Zuckerman argues that autobiography conceals the truth, whereas fiction allows the writer to convey an uninhibited truth, through the construction of a creative narrative. Sticking to the facts, as has been discussed in the previous chapter, results in “self-censorship” (*TF*, 191) and inhibition in relation to the re-telling of personal experience. In *Operation Shylock*, Roth accedes to this view. When discussing his cousin Apter’s horrific childhood and the subsequent stories of hardship he relates to “Philip” in Israel, “Philip” says:

Are his stories accurate and true? I myself never inquire about their veracity. I think of them instead as fiction that, like so much of fiction, provides the storyteller with the lie through which to expose his unspeakable truth. (*OS*, 58)

Like so many of the characters “Philip” encounters in Israel, Apter’s truth cannot be extrapolated. *Operation Shylock* in its exploration of selves deconstructs the idea of a static truth, in particular, when it relates to ethnic identity. The text destabilises realist and essentialist notions of the subject and what we are left with is a fully realised concept of the performative Rothian self. The form the novel takes reflects this central idea, showing that if the self is performance-based then any attempt to represent the self in narrative will require the act of invention.

iv) Halcion and Diaspora

In the opening section of the novel, “Philip” recounts in detail his Halcion-induced breakdown. As discussed in Chapter One, Roth touches on this topic in the prologue to *The Facts*, where he says it was the major impetus for writing the autobiography. However, in *Operation Shylock* the narrator is much more candid about the experience and recalls in detail the harrowing period in which he suffered physical pain and severe mental anxiety. It is interesting to note here how Roth is much more candid about this breakdown in *Operation Shylock*, a work of “fiction”, than he was in his “autobiographical narrative” in *The Facts*. “My mind began to disintegrate,” “Philip” tells us, “The word DISINTEGRATION seemed itself to be the matter out of which my brain was constituted, and it began spontaneously

coming apart” (*OS*, 20). “Philip” recalls that this breakdown was “as distinctly physical a reality as a tooth being pulled” (*OS*, 20). Imagining his disintegration as the actual coming apart of that word, the “fourteen letters, big, chunky irregularly sized components [...] tore jaggedly loose from one and other” (*OS*, 20) intones the loss of the self as it is or can be conceived of through language. That he felt it also as a physical pain emphasises the significance of the corporeal self to the construction and maintenance of self-identity, and consequently the insufficiency of language as a mode of conveying or communicating key aspects of this identity, a theme which will be explored in detail in Chapter Five. Language cannot fully convey physical pain or the experience of pain. Pipik, in his physical resemblance to “Philip”, will remind him of this also, as will be discussed in the subsequent section.

“Philip” relates how even though he discovered “through a lucky break,” (*OS*, 25) that Halcion tablets had caused his fractured state of mind, he still doubted the extent to which they had been to blame. He remained half-convinced that something integral in him had been primarily responsible for his collapse. He fears that it was a defect of sorts that was as much his, and not Halcion’s, as was for example, his “prose-style” or his “childhood” (*OS*, 27). “Philip” fears that as well as being the self that he imagines himself to be he is also something other entirely:

a shamefully dependent, meaninglessly deviant, transparently pitiable, brazenly defective *that*, [...] without introspection, without serenity, without any of the ordinary boldness that makes life feel like such a great thing. (*OS*, 27)

The idea that his breakdown was a nightmare of his own making pervades the text of *Operation Shylock*, as he tries to hold firm to a knowable sense of self. As Josh Cohen notes this pitiable self is the first of “Philip’s” doubles to emerge and is “far more insistent” than “Philip’s” “external double”.¹²⁵ Pipik will nonetheless pose a similar challenge to “Philip’s” equilibrium as he threatens “Philip’s” authority of self, reminding him just how fragile a claim to authentic identity can be. Uncertainty as to the truth of his recovery, both during that period and from his retrospective narrative position, is typical of the continuous doubts the narrator

¹²⁵ Josh Cohen, “Roth’s Doubles”, Parrish ed. (2007), 84.

displays as to the events he relates. It is an unsettling narrative device that gathers considerable momentum once the events of the novel are moved to Israel.

That “Philip” must travel to Israel to reclaim his identity and re-assert his authenticity is a fitting concept for someone who has spent much of his literary career in the Diaspora, exploring the mindset of the assimilated Jewish-American male. But “Philip’s” visit to Israel threatens to land him right back to a state of mental disintegration as he is forced, to once again, engage with a conflicting version of his identity that forces him to question and attempt to re-establish a stable sense of selfhood. Retaining a sense of reality in Israel gradually becomes the problem of the novel as epistemological uncertainty begins to dominate the narrative. In Israel, like Zuckerman’s experience in Prague in *The Prague Orgy*, “Philip” is constantly bombarded with the “storification of everyday life” (*OS*, 231). “Where everything is words, you’d think I’d have some mastery and know my way around” (*OS*, 149), he states. But Israel with its “immeasurable suspicions, [its] flood of mocking, angry talk” where life is one “vicious debate,” proves too much verbal violence even for a writer such as “Philip”. “I’d be better off in the jungle” he thinks, “where a roar’s a roar and one is hard put to miss its meaning”(OS, 149-150).

The angry talk is part of a number of competing voices that challenge “Philip’s” attempt to impose meaning on his surroundings. While Pipik is an obvious counter-self, others are more subtly woven into the text and often work to force “Philip” into a binary position of discourse. Appelfeld, for example, is the Jewish writer that “Philip” is not, because of their “*antithetical* twentieth-century Jewish biographies” (*OS*, 210). George Ziad and Smilesburger too, in either their anti-Zionist or Zionist ways, are opposing voices to Roth, as well as to each other. Pipik, however, in subsuming “Philip’s” identity, assumes to speak for him. He claims to know “Philip” better than he knows himself. “I know your *life* inside out,” he tells “Philip”, “I could be your biographer. I *am* your biographer” (*OS*, 73). While Roth, as author, may be the ultimate biographer of both “Philip” and Pipik, “Philip’s” experience in *Operation Shylock* echoes that of Peter Tarnopol’s in *My Life as Man*, as he finds himself all at once defined by those around him. Ziad, Smilesburger, Supposnik and Pipik all attempt to tell “Philip” who he is.

Each of these characters tries to prise the narrative from “Philip” as they deliver lengthy and forceful speeches. George Ziad, for example, delivers a

scathing attack on the Israeli Jew, subsequently defining “Philip” in opposition to this. “There is more Jewish spirit and Jewish laughter and Jewish intelligence on the Upper West Side of Manhattan than there is in this entire country,” (*OS*, 122) he tells “Philip”, condemning Israeli Jews for the arrogant position he feels they take towards the Diaspora Jew. “As if a Jew who speaks Hebrew isn’t just *another kind of Jew*,” he says (*OS*, 125). For George, the Israeli Jew with his static and unified existence and self-assured identity is not an authentic Jew but merely another impoverished self. Smilesburger, a master of rhetoric also makes a pitch for “Philip’s” allegiance, pressing his conscience by telling him that he is representative of the Jew “who is not accountable” (*OS*, 352). Smilesburger attempts to recruit Roth for a spying mission by manipulating the stereotype of the disengaged assimilated Jew; he targets the privileged nature of “Philip’s” American life. “Go to wherever you feel most blissfully unblamable. That is the delightful luxury of the utterly transformed American Jew,” (*OS*, 352) he tells “Philip”.

v) “I AM THE YOU THAT IS NOT WORDS” (*OS*, 87): Pipik

Amidst the impositions threatening his identity in Israel, “Philip” begins to define himself against others, as in the case of Appelfeld and also in the case of Pipik where he describes him in opposing terms, “the genuine versus the fake, [...] the resilient versus the ravaged, the multiform versus the monomaniacal, the accomplished versus the unfulfilled” (*OS*, 249). These binaries further equate Pipik with the self that “Philip” had known during his breakdown. Thus, Pipik not only represents a prototype for the Rothian self in his act of impersonation, but more significantly, he is an embodiment of “Philip’s” worst self. “Philip” increasingly comes to recognise in this other self, desperation and despair reminiscent of the emotional state he found himself in during his collapse. On encountering Pipik in his hotel room, “Philip” describes the shock he felt upon seeing his impostor’s face. “Philip” observes how Pipik looked exactly as he had during his breakdown:

His face was the face I remembered seeing in the mirror during the months when I was breaking down. His glasses were off, and I saw in his eyes my own dreadful panic of the summer before, my eyes at their most fearful, back

when I could think of little other than how to kill myself. He wore on his face what had so terrified Claire: my look of perpetual grief. (*OS*, 179)

This encounter again recalls the short story "Eli the Fanatic." Interestingly, Eli, like "Philip" in *Operation Shylock*, has previously suffered a nervous breakdown and his engagement with the orthodox Jew and Holocaust survivor, whose face "was no older than Eli's," (*GC*, 235) sends him back to a state of bewilderment where he is forced to question his sanity: "he quaked an eighth of an inch beneath his skin to think that he had chosen the crazy way" (*GC*, 272). While Eli, instead, chooses to believe that "he wasn't flipping out" (*GC*, 272), his transformation into the Hasidic Jew, as discussed previously, nonetheless ends with him being restrained and administered a drug that "calmed his soul, but did not touch it down where the blackness had reached" (*GC*, 275).

Eli's attempt to re-invent himself in the guise of this second self, and to engage with a part of his Jewish past that he previously sought to deny, ends in failure and breakdown. Similarly, in *Operation Shylock* "Philip" fears that his encounter with Pipik will result in another breakdown. Although he may never find out the truth about Pipik, his encounter with this double has sentenced him to a lifetime of "insufferable sieges of confusion" (*OS*, 307). Like Eli's orthodox Jew, "Philip's" Pipik has put him in touch with the "blackness" of self-division and disintegration. Eli, an early example of Roth's performative protagonists, fails to fully realise his self-invention. In contrast, "Philip" as a late character, is all too aware of what's at stake.

When Eli encounters his Jewish other wearing his suit, his first instinct is to reach out and "button down the collar of his shirt that somebody else was wearing" (*GC*, 268). A similar incident occurs in *Operation Shylock*. When "Philip" meets Pipik for the first time he notes how they were identically dressed. Pipik, "Philip" observes, was wearing "a perfect replica of my colorless uniform" (*OS*, 76). Eli, at the moment of recognition, felt "that he was two people. Or that he was one person wearing two suits" (*GC*, 268). Similarly "Philip", seeing Pipik dressed identical to him, notes how "everything inexplicable became even more inexplicable, as though what we were missing were our navels" (*OS*, 76). But while Eli tries to reach out to his double, "Tell me, what I can do for you, I'll do it ..." (*GC*, 269), "Philip" is propelled by an urge to outwit and humiliate his. "I was overcome with laughter," "Philip" says, "never had anyone seemed less of a menace to me or a

more pathetic rival for my birthright. He struck me instead as *a great idea...yes a great idea breathing with life!*" (OS, 83). As a writer "Philip" has an appreciation for Pipik's self-transformation. However, as a subject in the recovery stages of a breakdown, he also knows that outwitting Pipik is vital to his survival.

In order to defend himself against Pipik "Philip" relies on his fiction-making capabilities and sets about re-writing his impostor. As Derek Parker Royal notes "Philip" "does this by doing what he does best: turning Pipik into a parody."¹²⁶ In naming him Moishe Pipik, or "Moses Bellybutton" "Philip" attempts to turn his impostor's invention upon itself so that he becomes less of a threat. Naming him is also a means of knowing him, of "exorcising and possessing him all at once" (OS, 115). "Moishe Pipik," "Philip" explains, was "a name I had learned to enjoy long before I had ever read of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde or Golyadkin the First and Golyadkin the Second" (OS, 115). The name, "Philip" recalls, was "a derogatory, joking nonsense name" that was "thought to be definingly expressive of an impish inner self" (OS, 116). The name gets its effect from the juxtaposition of the serious and the ridiculous and, "Philip" suggests, "probably connoted something slightly different to every Jewish family on our block" (OS, 116). While Moses, as a central figure of the Torah, signifies a claim to ethnic identity, it is "Philip's" evaluation of the "Pipik" that allows him to discredit his impostor:

the thing that for most children was neither here nor there, neither a part nor an orifice, somehow a concavity and a convexity both [...] the sole archaeological evidence of the fairy tale of one's own origins, the lasting imprint of the foetus who was somehow oneself without actually being anyone at all. (OS, 116)

The Pipik, "Philip" notes, is "the silliest, blankest, stupidest watermark" of human existence (OS, 116). While Pipik tells "Philip" "I AM THE YOU THAT IS NOT WORDS" (OS, 87), removing himself outside of "Philip's" linguistic control, "Philip", here, in naming Pipik as he does, re-writes him as something that is "neither here nor there," something that marks an absence as much as it does a presence.

¹²⁶ Derek Parker Royal, "Texts, Lives and Bellybuttons: *Operation Shylock* and the re-negotiation of subjectivity", Halio and Siegel eds. (2005), 83.

As discussed in Chapter One, the circumcised penis often marks the site of male Jewishness in Roth's work. In *Patrimony* Roth used this image of the circumcised penis as a signifier of ethnic continuity, one that connects fathers and sons to a Jewish heritage, despite the vastly different experiences of that heritage. In *Operation Shylock*, the bellybutton, as Royal observes denotes "a signifying mark" that "suggests more of an absence than a presence."¹²⁷ Furthermore this absence is simultaneously suggested in Pipik's lack of an authentic penis. The penile implant that he comically thrusts at "Philip" shouting "*There's reality. Like a rock!*" (*OS*, 205) is invariably the exact opposite. As Debra Shostak notes Pipik's implant is "mere simulation" one that acts as an "analogy to his selfhood" as "Pipik can only realise an identity for himself as a simulacrum, the shadow self of Philip, all tricks and performance."¹²⁸ The inauthentic reality of this implant allows "Philip" to reassert his own claim to authenticity. "You're a blank to me" "Philip" tells Pipik, "I even get the feeling that without me around you're a blank to yourself" (*OS*, 191). For "Philip", Pipik's impersonation has resulted in nothingness. He has become a "formless, fragmented thing. A kind of wildly delineated nothing" (*OS*, 191). Roth problematises his concept of the performative self. Pipik's self-invention is conceived of in terms of self-abnegation, a threat that always existed in Roth's assertion within these "walking texts" that identity and subjectivity are all play and impersonation. For "Philip", Pipik has gone beyond the human urge to be other than who he is. He is "in the mirror" where he is "improbably evolved into somebody else already" (*OS*, 180). "Philip" interestingly equates himself with having done the same, yet he firmly roots this urge in the creative impulse of the writer: "I had succumbed too, [...] in my books: looking like myself, sounding like myself, even laying claim to convenient scraps of my biography, and yet, beneath the disguise of me, someone entirely other" (*OS*, 180).

Pipik represents more than just an over-wrought imagination. "Philip's" double is terminally ill and in his nearness to death he holds a particular fascination for "Philip", one that attaches itself to a sense of his own mortality. The fear of losing the self, of becoming not simply a not-self but of becoming a non-self is pressing in the text. Observing a sleeping Pipik, "Philip" attests:

¹²⁷ Ibid., 84.

¹²⁸ Shostak, *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives*, 97.

This is what I would look like if I were to die tonight [...] This is my corpse. I am sitting here alive even though I am dead. I am sitting here after my death. Maybe it's before my birth. I am sitting here and, [...] I do not exist. (*OS*, 186)

“Philip” reveals how during his breakdown he thought about killing himself every day (*OS*, 22). His “clamouress longing for obliteration” during this time was restrained only by the thought of his father whose life would be “smashed to smithereens” in the event of his suicide (*OS*, 23). Pipik brings these thoughts of death back to mind and “Philip’s” desire to “crush” (*OS*, 204) him is therefore an attempt to keep death firmly at bay. Towards the end of the narrative, attempting to re-assert his authorial control and to reverse this image of his own death, “Philip” composes an imaginary scenario based around Pipik’s death. He imagines receiving a letter from Wanda Jane describing the last months of Pipik’s life. In Israel, his novelist’s imagination, his ability to write, is his last line of defence. “The alphabet,” he attests “is all there is to protect me; it’s what I was given instead of a gun” (*OS*, 323). In addition to envisioning his death, “Philip” imagines that in his dying months Pipik had been writing an exposé about him called “His Way”. The manuscript, however, turns out to be nothing but blank pages. Pipik’s impotency is further registered here in his inability to actually write. “Philip’s” imagined scenario renders Pipik’s impersonation defunct, as he cannot perform in the one area that is crucial to “Philip’s” identity. This imagined death and the blank manuscript serve as “Philip’s” revenge and his re-assertion of his own physical vitality. The introduction of the imaginative letter is also representative of the oblique nature of the text and the uncertainty it elicits as to who, at this stage, is actually inventing the events. As Shostak points out, “in the space of a paragraph “Philip” moves from the assertion that the letter was an invention to a claim about *reading* the letter.”¹²⁹ This section, in which “Philip” announces his invention and then proceeds to narrate as if the invention were real, is symptomatic of Roth’s strategy in *Operation Shylock*.

Pipik’s appearance threatens “Philip’s” fragile mental stability and through his programme of Diasporism, he simultaneously poses a threat to Israel as a signifier of Jewish identity. Pipik’s promotion of Diasporism is essentially a programme of extreme assimilation. By removing the state of Israel as a homeland for Jews, Diasporism argues for a Jewish identity that is not marked out by

¹²⁹ Shostak, *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives*, 98.

difference but by sameness and integration. Is Roth then aligning “Philip’s” identity with that of Israel, if Pipik is a nemesis to both? The equation seems unlikely as “Philip” finds himself unhinged in Israel as opposed to integrated. For example, when he meets Smilesburger in America some years later, he tells him “I am back in America. I am no longer recovering from Halcion madness. [...] I’m myself again solidly back on my own ground” (*OS*, 383). Israel and Halcion are notably linked here, as if one were as disorientating as the other. “Philip’s” “own ground” is clearly America. But conversely this aligns him with Pipik. For Pipik is the assimilated Jew *par excellence* whose propensity to invent himself has always been emphasised and celebrated by Roth. Pipik’s view of Israel as a failed experiment removes him from a belief in an essentialist Jewish identity and a Zionist belief in Israel as its ultimate signifier. His calls for Diasporism force “Philip” to directly confront his ethnic identity and his relationship to the state of Israel. Pipik is then, as Cohen notes of Roth’s doubles, “the self I both know and don’t want to know.”¹³⁰

Roth’s exploration of the ethnic subject largely argues against notions of essentialism. His use of the image of the bellybutton over and above the circumcised penis, as we have seen, serves to emphasise this. Impersonation, performance, and ventriloquism, all suggest a self-identity that is not fixed, but fluid and performative. Both Pipik and the textualised “Philip Roth” illustrate this concept. The state of Israel, however, in opposition to this, signifies a concept of Jewish identity that is fixed and static. Roth explored this question of Jewish authenticity in *The Counterlife* where Henry Zuckerman, Nathan’s brother, strives to be reborn in Jerusalem. Having recovered from major heart surgery, Henry, struck by what he perceives to be the emptiness of his assimilated American life, travels to Israel to reconnect with, and to solidify his Jewish identity. Bemused, Nathan reminds Henry that the identity he aims to subsume in Israel is, in fact, the antithesis of authentic. As it is so far removed from his own history Henry’s transformation rings hollow. “The fact remains,” Nathan insists, “that in our family the collective memory doesn’t go back to the golden calf and the burning bush [...] Maybe the Jews begin with Judea, but Henry doesn’t and he never will” (*TC*, 133). In *Operation Shylock*, “Philip”, unlike Henry, seeks not a rebirth but merely the

¹³⁰ Josh Cohen, “Roth’s Doubles”, Parrish ed. (2007), 84.

recovery of the person he was prior to his breakdown. "Philip's" experience in Israel, however, makes him painfully aware of the fragility of this identity as Pipik, among others, force him to reconsider his ethnicity and its centrality to his writing.

A scene crucially expressing this occurs towards the end of the novel when "Philip" is abducted by Smilesburger and left waiting in an abandoned schoolroom. "Philip" cannot read the Hebrew words that are written on the blackboard that translate as a passage from Genesis which also serves as an epigraph to the book: "So Jacob was alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak" (*OS*, epigraph). "Philip's" inability to decipher the words can be regarded as his inability to understand his reality in Israel, especially as it relates to his ethnic identity. "Philip", however, registers this incomprehension as vital to his understanding of this identity. Recalling his time in Hebrew school he asks, "[w]hat could possibly come of those three or four hundred hours of the worst possible teaching in the worst possible atmosphere for learning?" and concludes that "*everything!*" (*OS*, 312) had come of it:

out of the inscrutable words written on this blackboard had evolved every English word I had ever written. Yes all and everything had originated there, including Moishe Pipik. (*OS*, 312)

However, the association "Philip" tries to make here between Hebrew school and his identity is ultimately rendered superfluous by the fact that he cannot now translate the Hebrew letters. As Derek Parker Royal notes, "what 'Philip' may not realise and what Roth the author understands all too well, is the dubiousness of fixed meanings and points of origins, especially as it relates to notions of self."¹³¹

vi) "My kind of Jew" (*OS*, 394)

In his essay "Imagining Jews" Roth considers the dilemma for the Jewish writer in representing Jews in fiction. Discussing Saul Bellow's work he considers two types of Jewish characters, "the Jewish Jew" and the "non-Jewish Jew" the former being concerned with the "struggles of ethical Jewhood" and the latter with the "release of appetite and aggression" (*RMAO*, 265) With works that centre upon the non-Jewish Jew, Roth suggests that the character's ethnic identity is never the

¹³¹ Royal, "Texts, Lives, and Bellybuttons", Halio and Siegel eds. (2005), 86.

predominant feature. Of *The Adventures of Augie March* Roth says "You could, in fact, take the Jew out of the adventurous Augie March without doing much harm to the whole of the book" (*RMAO*, 260). Whereas in Bellow's *The Victim*, where "matters of principle and virtue are at issue," being Jewish means to be "accessible, morbidly so, to claims made upon the conscience" (*RMAO*, 260) and is therefore central to characterisation. In light of this analysis, Roth tries to account for the furore that surrounded the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint* and concludes that the "key element" which made the hero "a somewhat more interesting case than he might otherwise have been" was the fact that the man confessing to "forbidden sexual acts and gross offences against the family order" was a Jew (*RMAO*, 257). Jews, Roth notes, were not supposed to act like this:

Going wild in public is the last thing in the world that a Jew is expected to do – by himself, by his family, by his fellow Jews, and by the larger community of Christians whose tolerance for him is often tenuous to begin with, and whose code of respectability he flaunts or violates at his own psychological risk, and perhaps at the risk of his fellow Jews' physical and social well-being. Or so history and ingrained views argue. (*RMAO*, 260)

When creating his Jewish characters, it is precisely against "history and ingrained views" of what constitutes Jewish identity that Roth writes. In *Operation Shylock* "Philip", in Israel, is approached by an antiquarian bookseller named David Supposnik who presents him with a diary allegedly belonging to Leon Klinghoffer, a Jewish American killed by the PLO upon the *Achille Lauro* cruise ship. Supposnik asks "Philip" to take the diaries and write an introduction to them, suggesting that what Eleanor Roosevelt did for Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*, "Philip" can do for "The Travel Diaries of Leon Klinghoffer". "Don't be ridiculous," "Philip" responds, "I can't be responsible" (*OS*, 279). "Philip" is not prepared to sacrifice his writing in order to have the "correct Jewish outlook". Yet, while in Israel, there is a mounting sense of pressure on "Philip" to take that responsibility and to somehow atone for his representation of Jews. In their various attempts to tell "Philip" who he is, the characters he meets also propose to tell him who he should be. Smilesburger, for example, asks "Philip" to "Show some gratitude" (*OS*, 388) for having spent a life-time "informing" on Jews. "All your writing you owe to them," he tells "Philip", "without the Jews driving you crazy [...] there would be no writer at all" (*OS*, 388).

Smilesburger makes a direct appeal to “Philip’s” ethnicity, “Being as Jewish as you are is your most secret vice. Any reader of your work knows that” (OS, 388). While “Philip” makes it clear that his allegiance is first and foremost to his writing, and identifies Smilesburger’s speech with that of other “superior Jewish windbags,” (OS, 352) he nonetheless finds himself falling under the spell of this enthralling figure. Smilesburger appeals to “Philip” precisely because he represents the contradictory identity that he associates with the ethnic self:

Yes, Smilesburger is my kind of Jew, he is what “Jew” *is* to me, the best of it to me. Worldly negativity. Seductive verbosity. Intellectual vengery. The hatred. The lying. The distrust. The this-worldliness. The truthfulness. The intelligence. The malice. The comedy. The endurance. The acting. The injury. The impairment. (OS, 394)

This description recalls “Philip’s” words in *Deception* and, here, “Philip’s” “kind of Jew” is, similarly, a compendium of contrasting and opposing elements, both malleable and paradoxical. Smilesburger elaborates on this identity when he puts forward a concept of selfhood, rooted in multiplicity and divisiveness:

The divisiveness is not just between Jew and Jew – it is within the individual Jew. Is there a more manifold personality in all the world? I don’t say divided. Divided is nothing. Even the goyim are divided. But inside every Jew there is a *mob* of Jews. The good Jew, the bad Jew. The new Jew, the old Jew. The lover of Jews, the hater of Jews. [...] The Jewish Jew, the de-Jewed Jew. [...] Is it any wonder that the Jew is always disputing? He is a dispute incarnate! (OS, 334)

This hypothesis deconstructs the image of the socially responsible, morally aware Jew who can resist the temptations and the “antisocial appetite” (RMAO, 259) of the gentile world. The contending voices that it represents precisely illustrate the contention of selves, found within any one self, which the text, in form and theme, signals as the ultimate marker of identity.

Roth’s characters in *Operation Shylock* demonstrate this contention. George Ziad, for example, is portrayed as having undergone a total transformation in Israel and is almost unrecognisable to “Philip” in his guise of a ranting, paranoid and obsessive individual. While George had once seemed “successfully imperturbable” “Philip” now admits “he’d had him wrong in everyway” (OS, 123). The idea of getting people wrong has become a specific motif in Roth’s later fiction. The American Trilogy, in particular, centres on the premise of not

knowing, as Zuckerman attests in *American Pastoral*, getting people wrong is “how we know we’re alive.” (AP, 35) Similarly, “Philip” contends with his lack of knowledge in *Operation Shylock*. “The gush, the agitation, the volubility, the frenzy barely beneath the surface of every word he babbled [...] how could that be Zee?” (OS, 122-123). “Zee” has been consumed by “hatred and the great disabling fantasy of revenge” (OS, 129). Yet this transformation isn’t so much of a change as it is an emergence of a warring self that was previously hidden. “Philip” observes how George, in trying to forget his past, had been “living under an ice cap” (OS, 123). In George, “Philip” recognises the contention of selves that goes into making up any subjectivity. Observing his friend he states:

His life couldn’t seem to merge with anyone’s anywhere no matter what drastic experiment in remodelling he tried. Amazing, 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. And yet, even *more* amazing, a grown man, an educated adult, a full professor, who seeks *self-integration!* (OS, 152)

vii) The Writer as Moral Idiot: “Let your Jewish conscience be your guide”
(OS, 398)

As a result of these contending selves, within the text “Philip” is drawn into his own act of impersonation; one that echoes the authorial impersonation of Roth. When confronted with George, he allows him to mistake him for his impostor—the “Philip Roth” impersonated by Pipik, advocating Diasporism. Questioning his reasons for doing so, “Philip” asks was it “Adolescent audacity? Writerly curiosity? Callow perversity? Jewish mischief?” (OS, 128). The motive, however, seems to be born out of that innate capacity for transformation that defines the Rothian self. While impersonating his impostor “Philip” admits “This little leave I had taken not merely of my senses but of my life was inexplicable to me—it was as though reality had stopped and I had gotten off” (OS, 163). “Had I even been present?” (OS, 163) he asks of his performance. “Philip”, here, has clearly entered into Roth’s game of “reality shift” (D, 62). Reality shift is intended to free up the self and conversely allows one to imagine the self of the other, something that “Philip” had originally intended to do on his trip to Israel when he hoped to be

“subsumed in Appelfeld” (OS, 55). However, it also requires a certain level of unscrupulousness. For example, in *Deception*, when “Philip” convinces his lover to engage in “reality shift” and play at being the biographer of Nathan Zuckerman, suggesting that she “should be the writer” (OS, 101) his lover responds, “Nope. Never. Couldn’t,” excusing herself on the grounds that she is not “a bad enough fellow,” and is “Insufficiently aggressive. Insufficiently ruthless. Insufficiently capricious, venomous, childish, *et cetera*” (OS, 101).

In *Operation Shylock* it also becomes clear that to go around in disguise requires a certain amount of ingenuity, coupled with a certain amount of callousness, as George points out to “Philip” when he discovers he has been posing as Pipik. He denounces “Philip” for consciously embellishing the self, when identity for him is detrimental. “You’re an actor,” he tells “Philip”, “an amusing actor performing endlessly for the admiration of his friends [...] What do an oppressed people’s problems matter to a great comic artist like you?” (OS, 283). This suggests that “Philip” as an American Jew, is free to reinvent himself without harmful consequence, unlike George, for example, whose Palestinian identity in Israel is much less negotiable—he is murdered by the novel’s end. George’s judgement does however raise an ethical question concerning representation and the act of impersonation. George calls “Philip” a “moral idiot” (OS, 283) for his free-play of identity. Emily Miller Budick describes how she initially took offence to Roth’s use of Israel in his fiction. “I did take offense at *The Counterlife*,” she states, explaining that it seemed “indelicate” for Roth to use the “dire political reality of Israel in order to play frivolous postmodernist games with Jewish identity.”¹³² Jonathan Raban issued a similar concern when he suggest that Israel in *Operation Shylock* functions merely as Roth’s “looking-glass house [...] a strangely underfurnished country which Roth, [...] neglects to describe or bring alive on the page.” For Raban, Israel, as portrayed within Roth’s novel, “exists as hardly more than a bare auditorium for the debates and tirades that form the substance of the book.”¹³³ But while Israel, as the ambiguous Jewish homeland, is indeed apt ground for Roth’s exploration of Jewish identities and American Jewish crises of identity, it is inaccurate to suggest that Roth treats Israel merely as stage for the exploration of conflicted subjectivities. In opposition, it can be said that Roth’s

¹³² Emily Miller Budick, “Roth and Israel”, Parrish ed. (2007), 72.

¹³³ Raban, “Book Review/ A vanity affair”, *The Independent*.

novels show a keen awareness of their historical moment, and the place the protagonists of these novels inhabit; more often than not they are revealed to be determined by it. While Roth may avail of postmodern games and parody postmodern devices, he never fully abandons the realist mode.

Roth himself has resisted the label postmodern stating that there is nothing “postmodernist”¹³⁴ about the way he represents selfhood. Instead, Roth contends that his work has been “a *large* effort of realism.”¹³⁵ Roth’s engagement with Israel, in both *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock*, is a direct effort to explore, as opposed to exploit, the question of Israel and to consider how it relates to, and affects, the consciousness of his Jewish American characters. As Andrew Furman states, Roth “has engaged Israel with far greater intellectual vigour than any other contemporary Jewish-American writer.”¹³⁶ In crediting Roth for his willingness to engage with the subject of Israel, Furman also notes how works such as *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock* confused a number critics who have “long chastised Roth for his flippant, irresponsible treatment of his Jewish subjects.”¹³⁷ While Budick is not one such critic, she admits that Roth’s treatment of Israel did, at one time, cause her offence. Budick interestingly explains how it took her “a few years’ distance to understand that Roth knew full well [...] that Israel was a reality for which people gave their lives.”¹³⁸

It is this “distance,” particularly when it is geographical, that seems to qualify one’s right to represent or explore Israel, both as a concept and as a historical reality. Throughout the text “Philip” is condemned precisely because of his geographical distance from Israel. His identity as an American Jew is registered as a position of privilege that exempts him from the Jewish historical struggle. The text of *Operation Shylock*, however, refutes this notion as Roth acknowledges how the historical reality of Israel, like the historical reality of the Holocaust, poses a serious identity crisis for the assimilated Diaspora Jew. In opposition, not engaging with either of these issues would run the precise risk of being flippant in relation to serious historical and political strife. Paradoxically, it is Pipik with his programme of Diasporism, and not “Philip”, who aims to evade and forget Jewish historical

¹³⁴ Roth, “An Interview with Philip Roth”, Searles ed. (1992), 253.

¹³⁵ Roth, quoted in Hermione Lee, “‘Life Is and’: Philip Roth in 1990”, Searles ed. (1992), 265.

¹³⁶ Andrew Furman. *Israel Through the Jewish-American Imagination: A Survey of Jewish-American Literature on Israel 1928-1995*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), 128.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.* 128.

¹³⁸ Budick, “Roth and Israel”, Parrish ed. (2007), 72.

struggle. "Philip", however, reminds Pipik that history is, in fact, a very real thing. Speaking of the Holocaust, he reminds Pipik:

Those twelve years *cannot* be expunged from history any more than they can be obliterated from memory, however mercifully forgetful one might prefer to be. The meaning of the destruction of European Jewry cannot be measured or interpreted by the brevity with which it was attained. (*OS*, 42)

Roth's willingness to write about Israel testifies not to an exploitation of a situation he is removed from, but to an acknowledgment that if Jewish American self-consciousness is going to be realistically explored, the reality of the Israeli state and what it signifies for Jewish histories and identities should not be ignored.

The ethics of representation and disclosure, which Roth acknowledged in *Patrimony*, are once again addressed in *Operation Shylock*. Here, the unseemliness of the writer is explored in debates surrounding "Philip's" Jewish American perspective. However, the issue is also raised on a much more personal level, in terms reminiscent of confidences betrayed in *Patrimony*. In *Operation Shylock* "Philip" casually confesses to marital infidelity when his adulterous night with Jinx is announced in two coarse sentences: "I implanted myself and then I fled. I penetrated her and I ran" (*OS*, 238). The book is dedicated to Claire Bloom, whom Roth was married to at the time. The inclusion can, of course, be considered as a clever ploy on Roth's part to convince the reader that he is telling the truth, by "compromising [himself]" (*D*, 177) and portraying himself in this unflattering light. But whatever the motive, the revelation attests to the potentially damaging effects to close relatives that can arise, in particular, from the confessional or autobiographical mode. This issue of responsibility is mainly problematised in the text through "Philip's" relationship with Smilesburger. In the course of the book "Philip" finds himself answerable to this Jewish father: "There's something in Smilesburger" "Philip" affirms, "that evokes not my real father but my *fantastic* one" (*OS*, 378). Smilesburger condemns the very act of disclosure when he lectures "Philip" on *loshon hora* – "the sin of evil speech" (*OS*, 333), which extends to the act of writing. "We talk too much," Smilesburger tells "Philip" "part of the Jewish problem is that the voice is too loud. Too insistent. Too aggressive" (*OS*, 332). Smilesburger aligns "Philip" with this act of evil speech or the act of informing. Although Smilesburger's speech against *loshon hora* leads "Philip" to

identify him as yet another “unbridled performer [...] another coldly calculating actor”, (*OS*, 338) he still concedes to his wishes.

At Smilesburger’s request “Philip” agrees to undertake his intelligence-gathering mission and then subsequently agrees to commit himself to silence, to a policy of non-disclosure. While trying to account for his obedience and for why he agreed to work for him, “Philip” admits, “I had done what I’d done because he had wanted me to do it; I’d obeyed him just as any other of his subordinates would have [...] and I couldn’t explain to myself why” (*OS*, 377). This contrasts greatly with Roth’s decision in *Patrimony* to disobey Herman’s request not to tell anybody, “Don’t tell the children [...] Don’t tell Claire” (*PTS*, 173), and thus further emphasises “Philip’s” enthrallment. While this may be registered as a subconscious desire to right previous wrongs, it fundamentally serves as a good plot device, as did the graveyard diversion in *Patrimony* (*PTS*, 19), that allows Roth to dramatise the issue of disclosure.

Smilesburger urges “Philip” to call the book fiction, so as not to compromise the safety of the Israeli state by disclosing the details of “Operation Shylock.” The book consequently portrays the picture of a writer compromised. The story of the compromise becomes the epilogue. Entitled “Words Generally Only Spoil Things”, it replaces what was to be chapter eleven, “Operation Shylock”. While the details of “Operation Shylock” are held back, we are left with a debate between “Philip” and Smilesburger that becomes a discussion on the generic nature of the book itself. As aforementioned, Smilesburger appeals to “Philip’s” identity as a Jew but, here, he also appeals to his sensibility as a writer as he becomes his unlikely editor. “Never in my life had I submitted a manuscript to any inspector anywhere for this sort of scrutiny,” “Philip” notes (*OS*, 377). “Philip” tries to account for his reasons for sending the completed manuscript of *Operation Shylock* to Smilesburger, and an analysis of the status of the text as a factual work is subsequently put forward. “Philip” describes how, after reading the finished book, it struck him as implausible. On reading through the manuscript “Philip” states, “I had begun to wonder if Pipik in Jerusalem could have been any more slippery than I was being in this book about him” (*OS*, 360). “I wanted Smilesburger,” “Philip” states, “to dispel my own vague dubiousness by corroborating that I was neither imperfectly remembering what had happened nor taking liberties that falsified the reality” (*OS*, 360). When Pipik initially appears,

“Philip” is loath to validate him by conferring on him the status of a double. He refuses to afford him this position of power and significance:

The other one. The double. The impostor. It only occurred to me how these designations unwittingly conferred a kind of legitimacy on this guy’s usurping claims. There was no “other one.” There was one and one alone on the one hand and a transparent fake on the other. (*OS*, 115)

“Philip’s” refusal to recognise Pipik as a double is part of the text’s resistance towards being read as anything other than a factual work. For “Philip”, applying a psychoanalytical reading of the double to Pipik, as well as affording him significance, also confers him with a fictional status. “I knew all about these fictions about the fictions of the self-divided,” “Philip” says, “But this was no book I was studying or one I was writing” (*OS*, 115). Throughout the text Roth has “Philip” deliver such metafictional lines, often pre-empting his critics again by drawing attention to the implausibility of the story, which, he suggests, suffers from “an absence of inner coherence” and is “frivolously plotted, overplotted [...] with outlandish events [...] that there is nowhere for intelligence to establish a foothold and develop a perspective”(*OS*, 245).

That the protagonist is named “Philip Roth” and that parts of the book are verifiably true make it easy for the reader to forget that Roth is feigning truth here and feigning the fiction/autobiography dilemma. Yet, simultaneously, the inclusion of such statements serves to remind the reader just who exactly is in control of the “narrative ping-pong” in which Roth would have his readers believe that he is merely “the little white ball” (*OS*, 358). As discussed in relation to *The Facts*, Roth equates the fiction-writing process with that of autobiography when he demonstrates that both modes of writing involve the act of invention and the imposition of structure so that meaning can be obtained. Here, Roth’s strategy is somewhat different as he testifies to the difficulty of representing reality at all. What is real for the narrator of *Operation Shylock* is presented and defined as improbable. The facts cannot be known because the narrator does not know or understand the sequence of events. For him, the whole point of the narrative is its “improbable reality” (*OS*, 360). Yet the experience he has tried to relay is discounted by Smilesburger who tells him it is a misinterpretation of that experience:

This is not a report of what happened, because, very simply, you haven't the slightest idea of what happened. You grasp almost nothing of the objective reality. Its meaning evades you completely. I cannot imagine a more innocent version of what was going on and what is signified. (*OS*, 391)

For Smilesburger, "Philip's" account is an example of "subjectivism at its most extreme" and he urges "Philip" to call it an "artistic creation" as he will then "only be calling it what it more or less is" (*OS*, 391).

Operation Shylock ends with a "Note to the Reader" in which it is stated that the book is a work of fiction. The note ends with the line "This confession is false" (*OS*, 399). The reader is left unsure as to whether this is referring to the text of *Operation Shylock* or to the note itself. This note, along with the preface, can be taken as framing statements on the factual status of the book. While the preface remains part of the central narrative, and is delivered in the narrative voice of "Philip", the "Note to the Reader" (*OS*, 399) is placed outside this narrative and thus can be aligned to the voice of the author. However, like the central narrative this note is too ambiguous to decipher. Commenting on this "Note to the Reader" Jonathan Raban suggests somewhat vexedly that it "is typical of Philip Roth's grand manner in this novel that his departing gesture is to close the door so firmly in his reader's face."¹³⁹ Yet this final "gesture" primarily serves to reinforce what the novel demonstrates, mainly the interchangeable relationship between fact and fiction. In opposition it can be said that Roth does not wish to "close the door" in "his reader's face" but to open the reader to new ways of reading.

Operation Shylock is characterised by its parodying of postmodern aesthetics, its language-based concept of self, and the idea of a polymorphous sense of existence. Yet the text and the reality it seeks to convey are not bound by these characteristics. Roth's themes are very much rooted in the reality of the world, as *Operation Shylock* raises pressing questions about how the self conceives of itself amidst a historically and politically determined reality. While the text may not be a confession of the sensationalist kind, its fusion of fact and fiction reveals how the writer attempts to grapple with this reality and represent a sense of self in the world. Roth's use of the confessional mode and his fictionalising of the self enable him to destabilise fixed notions of identity, whether these are notions put in place by the mode of autobiography or those put in place by cultural codes and

¹³⁹ Raban, "Book Review/ A vanity affair", *The Independent*.

specific ethnicities. The result is a narrative mode that cogently reflects the constructed identities by which we live.

Chapter Three

“The inverted saint whose message is desecration” and “The philosopher-king of ordinary life”: *Sabbath’s Theater and American Pastoral*

I. *Sabbath’s Theater*

i) Sabbath the “anti-illusionist” (*ST*, 445)

“Let us affront and reprimand the smooth mediocrity and squalid contentment of the times” states Ralph Waldo Emerson in “Self-Reliance.”¹⁴⁰ Mickey Sabbath, the unruly and relentlessly transgressive protagonist of *Sabbath’s Theater*, is a sixty-four-year old, arthritic “ex-puppet-artist without any idea what he now was or what he was seeking” (*ST*, 198). He is a grossly attenuated version of Emersonian non-conformity, seeking merely to “affront and affront and affront til there was no one on earth unaffronted.”¹⁴¹ “To being a human being” Sabbath has always said “[l]et it come” (*ST*, 152), and the novel does not hold back in unleashing the “inherent disorder” of Sabbath’s “real human life” (*ST*, 247). The novel’s reception testifies to the nature of that unleashing. Frank Kermode calls it a “splendidly wicked book” whose very “outrageousness” is part of its strategy: “if nobody feels outraged the whole strategy has failed.”¹⁴² Michiko Kakutani fails to appreciate that strategy when she labels *Sabbath’s Theater* “distasteful and disingenuous” and suggests that Roth’s characterisation of Mickey Sabbath and “the depressing gropings of [this] dirty old man” has resulted “in a novel that’s sour instead of manic, nasty instead of funny, lugubrious instead of liberating.”¹⁴³ William H. Pritchard, in

¹⁴⁰ Ralph Waldo Emerson. “Self-Reliance”, *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Brooks Atkinson ed., (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 139.

¹⁴¹ Roth, *Sabbath’s Theater* (London: Vintage, 1996), 198.

¹⁴² Frank Kermode, “Howl”, review of *Sabbath’s Theater* by Philip Roth. *The New York Review of Books* 42.18, 16 November 1995 <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1717>> [accessed July 2009].

¹⁴³ Michiko Kakutani, “Mickey Sabbath, You’re No Portnoy”, Books of the Times: Review of *Sabbath’s Theater* by Philip Roth. *The New York Times*, 22 August 1995. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1995/08/22/books/books-of-the-times-mickey-sabbath-you-re-no-portnoy.html>> [accessed August 2009].

contrast, calls it Roth's "longest and, [...] richest, most rewarding novel"¹⁴⁴ while Doran Weber suggests that it is "arguably Roth's finest" work, and "one of those books that forces us to reappraise its author's career."¹⁴⁵

In Mickey Sabbath Roth has evidently created his greatest provocateur. Sabbath can be described as vile, loathsome, self-destructive and narcissistic character whose life is marred by his need to transgress moral boundaries. Yet he can simultaneously be seen as a powerfully rendered human (if not conventionally humane) character who has painfully lost his way in a life plagued by grief and the loss of those he has loved. The epigraph of the novel is a taken from *The Tempest*, where Prospero declares "Every third thought shall be my grave" (*ST*, epigraph). Thoughts of the grave dominate Sabbath's thinking as he grieves for the dead and communes with the ghost of his mother who he believes has come to urge him toward suicide: "She had returned to take him to his death" (*ST*, 17). The trajectory of the novel is towards this suicide yet the narrative moves back and forth in time as it charts Sabbath's life and its subsequent disorder. The novel spans his time as a marine, his role as street performer in New York and director of the "Indecent Theater," through to the drama of his failed second marriage, and the "Great Disgrace" in which he is fired for inappropriate conduct with a student from Athena College, where he held a position teaching puppetry.¹⁴⁶ The text is set in 1994 when Sabbath is mourning the loss of his Croatian lover Drenka, and he revisits New York to attend the funeral of an old friend, Linc Gelman. The narrative drive throughout *Sabbath's Theater* is Sabbath's suicide: "For anyone who loves a joke, suicide is indispensable. For a puppeteer particularly there [...] is no more thoroughly amusing way to go" (*ST*, 443). Despite his morbidly humorous declarations, this desire for suicide goes unfulfilled.

¹⁴⁴ William H. Pritchard, "Roth Unbound", review of *Sabbath's Theater* by Philip Roth. *The New York Times*, 10 September 1995. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1995/09/10/books/roth-unbound.html>> [accessed August 2009].

¹⁴⁵ Doron Weber, "Sabbath's Theater", review of *Sabbath's Theater* by Philip Roth. *Boston Review*, October/November 2005. <<http://bostonreview.net/BR20.4/Weber.html>> [accessed July 2009].

¹⁴⁶ The text includes a transcript of an illicit phone conversation between Sabbath and the student, Cathy Goolsbee, which is printed at the bottom of the page and runs concurrently with the text of the central narrative (*ST*, 215-235). This inclusion adds to the already sequentially complex structure and poses a direct challenge to the reader in terms of how to read this particular section. Should the page be read from top to bottom, taking in the central narrative and then the transcript? Or should the transcript be read straight through in full causing the reader to back track to continue with the central text of the narrative or vice versa? This narrative technique was more recently employed by J. M. Coetzee in *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), the reading of which poses a similar challenge to the reader.

Sabbath's Theater can be as disorientating as the experience of the disordered mind it unsparingly conveys. In *Sabbath's Theater* Roth dispenses with the employment of a known narrator (such as Zuckerman, Kepesh or indeed, "Philip Roth") and uses instead an unnamed third-person narrator who conveys Sabbath's subjectivity through free indirect discourse. Yet Roth only loosely adheres to the technique of free indirect discourse, frequently moving from the third-person narrator to the first-person so that Sabbath's thoughts are variously conveyed through the pronouns "He" and "I." Ross Posnock, commenting on Roth's techniques, insightfully observes that "the relation of first and third person could be described as collaborative."¹⁴⁷ This collaborative technique, however, prevents the reader from locating a secure narrative position within the text. Consequently, the ambiguity lends a frantic energy to the narrative that, given the mania of Sabbath's mind, effectively brings together form and content in this technically accomplished novel.

The sequentially complex time-frame of *Sabbath's Theater* is a stylistic method that has become particular to Roth's later narratives; each of the novels of the trilogy avail of this technique as they seek, from an initial opening in the "present" of the text, to uncover their protagonists' hidden histories and recover the characters' vanished selves. In *Sabbath's Theater*, Sabbath's past is not hidden for purposes of self-concealment. It is an effort to keep grief at bay; an attempt to escape the grief caused by the tragic death of his brother Morty, the death of his mother, and the disappearance of his first wife Nikki. Sabbath, like the protagonists in Roth's American Trilogy whom he directly precedes, learns that he cannot escape his personal history and the intrusion of death and the unforeseen into his life. Drenka's death from cancer confirms that "[t]here's nothing on earth that keeps its promise" (*ST*, 32). Knowledge of this leaves Sabbath "self-haunted while [being] barely what you could call a self" (*ST*, 198). As a haunted self Sabbath is left asking: "Whatever did happen to my own true life? Was it taking place elsewhere?" (*ST*, 159). This precisely captures his sense of dislocation from himself and his concept of his life.

Sabbath's dislocation and the loss of his "entire conception of life" (*ST*, 441) merits an initial comparison with the protagonists of *American Pastoral*, I

¹⁴⁷ Ross Posnock, *Philip Roth's Rude Truth: The Art of Immaturity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 156.

Married a Communist, and *The Human Stain*. Whether it is Ira's rebellion against what he perceives to be social injustice, Coleman's passing, or the Swede's attempt to assimilate with ease into the cultural mainstream, the protagonists of Roth's American Trilogy aim to live autonomously. In doing so they each exert a tempered control over their existence that manifests itself in an intense desire to script their lives and the reality they inhabit. In contrast, for Sabbath there is no such control, no such scripting. Sabbath is an antithesis to the three protagonists of Roth's subsequent three novels. In contrast to the rigorous shaping and ordering of existence that the protagonists of the trilogy display, for Sabbath, the "problem that was his life was never to be solved":

His wasn't the kind of life where there are aims that are clear and means that are clear and where it is possible to say 'This is essential and that is not essential, this I will not do because I cannot endure it, and that I will do because I can endure it.' (ST, 108)

This passage is particularly telling in terms of the American Trilogy because it serves as a counterpoint to the penchant for life-planning that the protagonists of the trilogy engage in. While Sabbath, as we shall see, can be said to live autobiographically, his script is not a smooth trajectory, but is frantic and ever present. His story is born in the moment he acts or articulates, unlike the Swede or, in particular, Coleman Silk who conceives of his story methodically, systematically discarding his past while sculpting his future. While the non-conformist Sabbath anticipates Coleman Silk, unlike Coleman, Sabbath does not know what to do with his antagonism. While Coleman channels his antagonism into transformation, Zuckerman states his "art" was "being a white man" (THS, 345), Sabbath only channels disorder. He is thus representative of the chaos that Coleman, the Swede, and Ira Ringold try to control and counter.

ii) "I am the disorder" (ST, 203)

Roth has described *Sabbath's Theater* as a freeing up of his artistic voice, a freeing up that paved the way for the writing of the American trilogy and in particular *American Pastoral*: "I felt free. I feel like I'm in charge now."¹⁴⁸ It is not

¹⁴⁸ Roth, "Philip Roth at 70", interview by David Remnick. *BBC Four*, London, 19 March, 2003.

difficult to imagine how this was the case when one encounters a consciousness as energetically and forcefully drawn as Sabbath's. Sabbath is the "anti-illusionist" (ST, 445) who lives life without a "pitch" (ST, 347), railing against conventional society and its "eiderdown" existence (ST, 346). As a type of anarchic realist he seeks to reveal that there "is no protection" (ST, 344) in the conventions imposed by society. When staying at the home of his friend Norman Cowan, a friend who has become particularly successful, Sabbath awakens to discover a bountiful and luxurious breakfast awaiting him. The passage is worth quoting in full:

Surrounding his dishes and cutlery were boxes of four brands of cereal, three differently shaped, differently shaded loaves of hearty looking bread, a tub of margarine, a dish of butter and eight jars of preserves, more or less the band of colours you get by passing sunlight through a prism: Black Cherry, Strawberry, Little Scarlet . . . all the way to Greenage Plum and Lemon Marmalade, a spectral yellow. There was half a honeydew as well as half a grapefruit (segmented) under a taut sheet of Saran Wrap, a small basket of nipples oranges of a suggestive variety he'd not come across before, and an assortment of tea bags in a dish beside his place setting. (ST, 158)

After such a detailed description of abundance Sabbath thinks: "Now why do I alone in America think this is shit? Why didn't I want to live like this" (ST, 158). The cornucopian abundance here is reminiscent of Neil Klugman's enthrallment with the Patimkin's refrigerator in "Goodbye, Columbus". The refrigerator brimming with "Patimkin fruit" (GC, 71), like the Cowan's breakfast table, is representative of a social and WASPish status to which the young Neil Klugman aspires. Here it is posited by Sabbath, as "shit", a waste which is far from fruitful. His objections and resentment are unmercifully unleashed upon the Cowans: "[t]here is so much and I have so little of it" (ST, 159).

In the Cowan's apartment, after Sabbath has attempted to seduce Michelle Cowan (Norman's wife) and Norman has asked him to leave, Sabbath berates Norman for constantly seeking protection behind exteriors: "*But there isn't any*" he tells him, "Not even for you. Even you are exposed – what do you make of that? Exposed! Fucking naked, even in that suit!" (ST, 345). As a wearer of masks, Sabbath understands Norman's identity to be exemplified by his exterior appearance and takes satisfaction in exposing the masks and the impersonations of others:

Norman was dressed like the connoisseur of fine living that he was: double-breasted chalk-stripe suit, maroon silk tie with matching breast-pocket handkerchief [...] yes the whole figure emanated the ideals and scruples of humanity's better self and it wouldn't have been hard for Sabbath to believe that the office for which Norman shortly would be leaving in a limo had spiritual aims loftier even than those of a theatrical producer. (*ST*, 341)

Sabbath considers clothing to be a "masquerade" and thinks: "When you go outside and see everyone in clothes, then you know for sure that nobody has a clue as to why he was born and that, aware of it or not, people are perpetually performing in a dream" (*ST*, 413). The sociologist Anthony Giddens, speaking also of the performative nature of clothing, states:

Dress is another type of regime. In all cultures, dress is vastly more than simply a means of bodily protection: it is, manifestly a means of symbolic display, a way of giving external form to narratives of self-identity.¹⁴⁹

Clothes as performance have always interested Roth and through his characters he frequently exploits the concept of dress as "bodily protection", as a means by which characters attenuate "external form" to the self-narrative they wish to project. As discussed in Chapter Two in relation to "Eli the Fanatic" and *Operation Shylock*, how people wear and cast off identities through the attire of the body demonstrates the fluidity of identity; how identity is neither fixed nor static and can be temporarily or permanently altered by the casting off or the acquisition of a particular form of dress. Sabbath's clothes, for example, reflect the significance of dress to his own identity:

Norman would never have recognised the man in the foyer as me with the oversize hunting jacket atop the rube's flannel shirt and these big muddy boots on my feet, I look like a visitor from Dogpatch, either like a bearded character in a comic strip or somebody at your doorstep in 1900, a wastrel uncle from the Russian pale who is to sleep in the cellar next to the coal bin for the rest of his American life. (*ST*, 141)

Sabbath is fully aware of the ways in which dress serves to conceal or convey identities. Sabbath's retort to Norman that he is "Exposed!" (*ST*, 341) is an attempt to ridicule the Cowan's way of life. He goads Norman about his wife and chips away at their appearance of decorum to expose what he thinks must be the real agony of their existence:

¹⁴⁹ Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 62.

The machine that it all is. The house on Nantucket. The weekends at Brown as Debby's parents. [...] And there's the fun besides: the skiing, the tennis, Europe, the small hotel they love in Paris, the Université. The repose when all is well. Somebody there while you wait for the biopsy report to come back from the lab. No time for settlements and lawyers and starting again. (ST, 346)

Sabbath admits Norman's "*talent* is for this life" (ST, 346). Their choices demonstrate "[t]he courage of putting up with it instead – the 'realism'" (ST, 346). Sabbath locates this "realism" not alongside his own "objective reading of the slit" (ST, 347) but in the "segmented grapefruit: the partitioned body and the piquant blood" (ST, 346) that is symbolic of their choices and "indispensable to the[ir] way of life" (ST, 346). According to Sabbath, their lives are merely chaos contained while Sabbath, in contrast, lives without such socially conventional realism: "You're going to feel dashed by this" he tells Norman, "but on top of everything else I don't have, I don't have a pitch. [...] I am merely debris, in possession of nothing" (ST, 347). Norman, as representative of the *norm*, tries to deconstruct Sabbath's way of living by pointedly suggesting:

Isn't it tiresome in 1994, the role of rebel-hero? What an odd time to be thinking of sex as rebellion. [...] You fucking relic, Mickey! You fifties antique [...] quarrelling with society as though Eisenhower is president! (ST, 347)

Norman pinpoints the cause of Sabbath's current catastrophic existence as an "inverted saint whose message is desecration" (ST, 347) by comparing it to his own:

I proceed differently: If danger is going to find me anyway, I needn't pursue it [...] the extraordinary is assured [...] It's the ordinary that escapes us. I do know that. But that doesn't mean I care to abandon the portion of the ordinary I've been lucky enough to corral and hold on to. (ST, 344-345)

As Posnock notes, "Roth (and Sabbath) are acutely aware that [Sabbath's] oppositional stance is itself a cliché of modernism."¹⁵⁰ Yet for Sabbath the role of "rebel-hero" still holds sway in an increasingly prurient and puritan nineties America where his professional life is undone by a relationship he has with one of his students. Sabbath's self-definition relies upon this role of rebel, living his life against the grain and the expected. Norman simultaneously targets Sabbath's

¹⁵⁰ Posnock, *Philip Roth's Rude Truth*, 164.

removal from society when he tells him: "The immensity of your isolation is horrifying" (*ST*, 347). But this summation only further satisfies Sabbath, as it reconfirms his eagerness for death: "I don't think you ever gave isolation a real shot" he tells Norman, "It's the best preparation I know for death" (*ST*, 347).

iii) Sabbath and self-performance

Sabbath's desire to strip away the "wallpaper" (*ST*, 344) of daily existence is ironically done through the "sly and cunning masquerade" (*RMAO*, 123) that Roth has attributed to the writer. Sabbath is adept at "pass[ing] oneself off as what one is not" (*RMAO*, 123). But the improvisations of the self he engages in do not produce art. Sabbath had "paid the full price for art, only he hadn't made any" (*ST*, 143). When Sabbath loses the ability to perform as a finger-puppeteer due to his arthritic hands, he internalises the performative skill and in effect makes a puppet of the self. Sabbath's actual work of art is the self in the act of performance.

Sabbath's sense of self is thus still fundamentally appropriated by his position of antagonist, as he continues to conceive of himself against socially sanctioned models of identity. As David Brauner notes, "Sabbath's compulsive taboo-breaking is the expression of a credo of antagonism, his immorality an article of (bad) faith."¹⁵¹ Yet Sabbath's expression of a self unfettered to societal conventions comes at a price: "It had cost him dearly" the narrator states, "to clear a space where he could exist in the world as antagonistically as he liked" (*ST*, 444). The cost of existing how one likes has been a central concern for Roth in his exploration of identity as he has continually portrayed protagonists who struggle to be autonomous and self-defined, even if these self-definitions in their search for autonomy take the form of self-abnegation. Sabbath's need to exist antagonistically is an attempt to move beyond the markers of identity which seek to construct him. It is an attempt to author himself and, to a large extent, he has successfully done this. Of all Roth's characters Sabbath is the least constrained in terms of his Jewish identity. In opposition, here he becomes the "American boyfriend" to Drenka's immigrant otherness. Drenka, in her accented English confirms this: "to be able to dance with you and hear you sing the music. I suddenly step that close to it. To

¹⁵¹ Brauner, *Philip Roth*, 124.

America. I was dancing with America [...] You are America" (*ST*, 419). Yet in direct opposition to the Swede, Sabbath is unconcerned with epitomising the American ideal. As he tells Drenka, "Sweetheart, you were dancing with an unemployed adulterer. A guy with time on his hands" (*ST*, 419). Sabbath's continuous war against authority has seen him become, in the course of his lifetime, a signifier of transgression and impurity, the antithesis of the American identity embraced by the Swede. Alan Cooper, referring to a particular concept of American identity, comments on the notion of "good-guyism" that prevailed in the postwar era. Cooper asserts that good-guyism "marked the American self-image and invited everyone to work hard, raise families, get on the economic escalator and be nice."¹⁵²

While staying at the Cowan's, Sabbath, demonstrating his acute disdain for being "nice", steals ten thousand dollars which he finds in Michelle Cowan's drawer along with some erotic Polaroid photos of Michelle. Sabbath considers these photos and the money that accompanies them to be "the other half of her story" (*ST*, 350). Sabbath, a proficient performer wants to see beyond the surface of Michelle's life:

The laugh said that everything had shifted on her while her back was turned ... that she was sick of staying, sick of plotting leaving, sick of unsatisfied dreams, sick of satisfied dreams, sick of adapting, sick of not adapting, sick of just about everything except existing. Exulting in existing while being sick of everything that's what was in the laugh. (*ST*, 306)

Sabbath's ability to imagine Michelle Cowan's inner life stems, as Ross Posnock suggests, from his need to improvise.¹⁵³ However, it is also indicative of how he imagines the human condition to be. The Rothian sentiment that "[e]verybody has another life" (*ST*, 146), a counterlife, is tantamount to the way Sabbath exists in the world. Michelle Cowan's performance however, is also imagined by Sabbath in light of the onset of death: "Death is over in its corner doing deep knee bends" Sabbath thinks, "and one day soon will leap across the ring at her as mercilessly as it leaped upon Drenka" (*ST*, 305-306). Sabbath leaves the apartment and takes Michelle's ten thousand dollars and the Polaroid photos with him, leaving his

¹⁵² Alan Cooper, *Philip Roth and the Jews* (Albany: New York University Press, 1996), 8.

¹⁵³ Posnock, *Philip Roth's Rude Truth*, 179.

beggar's cup where the envelopes had been. The money he has taken will pay for his burial and preserve, to Sabbath's mind, the respectability of the Cowan's.

In retaliation to death's imposition Sabbath tries to position himself outside history, both past and present. We are told that "The news told him nothing [...] He didn't care who was at war with whom [...] he did not even want to know who the President was of the United States" (*ST*, 126). Sabbath's disengagement with the present is indicative of his inability to ever fully deal with the past. This inability is reflected in the temporal confusion he experiences throughout much of the novel. For example, standing on a street corner, Sabbath experiences a division of self where he is unable to successfully orientate himself in accordance with the outward reality of his surroundings:

He clutched the edge of the street vendor's stand, waiting for the coffee to save him. Thought went on independently of him, scenes summoning themselves up while he seemed to wobble perilously on a slight rise of where he was and where he wasn't. He was trapped in the process of self-division that was not at all merciful. (*ST*, 201)

This confusion is echoed in the narrative structure and narrative voice of the novel, as mentioned previously. The frequent switches from third-person to first-person and vice versa seem to give the reader access to an unfiltered, unmediated, and ultimately confused consciousness. The above account of Sabbath's divided state of existence occurs immediately after Sabbath has been remembering the past and how, alongside his brother Morty, "he was a happy-go-lucky-kid before the war" (*ST*, 201). This process of division is also noticeably connected with death. Sabbath describes this feeling of self-division as "[a] pale, pale analog to what must have happened to Morty when his plane was torn apart by flak: living your life backward while spinning out of control" (*ST*, 201). While Sabbath's experience may be a pale analogue to his brother's death, it nonetheless indicates a loss of self; one that specifically arises from a lack of biographical continuity that will eventually be made permanent by death.

Roth's representation of identity here can be considered in line with Anthony Giddens's definition of self-identity and autobiographical narrative. Giddens, in his analysis of modernity and self-identity, perceives how "All human beings, in all cultures, preserve a division between their self-identities and the

'performances' they put on in specific social contexts."¹⁵⁴ In Sabbath's case, self-identity has become the performance, and the self-division he experiences is problematic as it is outside the realm of culturally-encoded, conventional behaviour; as symbolised by the "segmented grapefruit" (*ST*, 346) he is presented with in the Cowan's apartment. Self-identity, as defined by Giddens is "the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of his or her biography."¹⁵⁵ Thus, Giddens asserts that "[a] person's identity is not to be found in behaviour [...] but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going"¹⁵⁶ (emphasis in original). If the individual is to "maintain regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world," the individual's biography "cannot be wholly fictive."¹⁵⁷ Furthermore, as the self is embodied, this biography is not just linguistically conveyed but also communicated through the body. According to Giddens, "[r]egularised control of the body is a fundamental means whereby a biography of self-identity is maintained."¹⁵⁸ Giddens stresses: "How far normal appearances can be carried on in ways consistent with the individual's biographical narrative is of vital importance for feelings of ontological security."¹⁵⁹ If a disassociation occurs between the routinised performance of the body and the individual consciousness, if an individual feels that they are "continually acting out most or all routines, rather than following them for valid reasons", they may experience feelings of ontological insecurity and in extreme cases they may begin to feel "disembodied."¹⁶⁰

Sabbath's feeling of self-division renders him incapable of identifying genuine or real sentiment in his own behaviour, which subsequently produces the sense of disembodiment that Giddens describes. This is particularly conveyed during his visit to his friend Norman Cowan. While Sabbath is trying to account for his current condition, the narrator states: "Obeying the laws of disappointment, disobedient Sabbath began to cry, and not even he could tell if the crying was an act or the measure of his misery" (*ST*, 143). Sabbath's disassociation from "obeying" the routines of the body is indicative of his sense of unreality and the

¹⁵⁴ Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 56.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 58-59.

extent to which his access to an integral sense of self has been diminished: “Trying to talk sensibly and reasonably about his life,” we are told, “seemed even more false to him than the tears – every word, every *syllable*, another moth nibbling a hole in the truth” (*ST*, 144). Sabbath experiences a division of self that leaves him reeling and exhausted, yet unable to tell if his despair and exhaustion are authentic.

Writing on “Madness and Identity in *Sabbath’s Theater*”, Ranen Omer-Sherman notes how Sabbath’s performance, his “protean self”, is “bereft of any other meaning”.¹⁶¹ Omer-Sherman favours an essentialist reading of Sabbath’s Jewishness, aligning him with “a *shtetl Ostjude* who [...] finds himself in tragic conflict with his surroundings, an ordeal that causes his rapid decline, from social shame to alienation to mental illness”.¹⁶² While this is a reading that I would not support as it reduces Roth’s protagonist to the single issue of his ethnic identity, his article is interesting in the sense that it raises the possibility of insanity in relation to Sabbath and performance. This is a subject which was neglected in reviews of the novels. Roth drew attention to Sabbath’s loss of sanity when, in interview with David Remnick, he describes Sabbath as someone who is losing his mind.¹⁶³ The scene quoted above, where Sabbath is portrayed as “trapped in the process of self-division that was not at all merciful” (*ST*, 201), precisely conveys Sabbath’s precarious mental state, an unhinging of subjectivity that can be located, not as Omer-Sherman suggests, in the loss of Sabbath’s Jewish identity but in his inability to retain a continuity of self outside of his ongoing performances. Shostak notes that this self-performance “can be seen as an extreme expression of the urge towards autobiographical acts, toward making somehow permanent the vanishing self.”¹⁶⁴ In light of Omer-Sherman’s suggestion of madness as a contributing factor to Sabbath’s experience of self-division, I would disagree with Shostak’s deMannian formulation that posits Sabbath’s self-performance solely as autobiographical epitaph and instead forward the reading that the “vanishing self” in Sabbath the puppeteer comes as a result of an unhinging of his mental stability. This is reflected in Roth’s description of him as feeling “porous, as though the last that was left of the whole concoction that had been a self was running out now

¹⁶¹ Ranen Omer-Sherman, “‘A Little Stranger in the House’: Madness and Identity in *Sabbath’s Theater*”, Royal ed. (2005), 174.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁶³ Roth, “Philip Roth at 70”, interview by David Remnick. *BBC Four*, London, 19 March 2003.

¹⁶⁴ Shostak, *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives*, 181.

drop by drop” (ST, 184). Furthermore, I would align this unhinging with Eakin’s forwarding of “hypernarrativa” as “[n]arrative as pathology”.¹⁶⁵ “Narrative”, Eakin states, “so necessary to the very existence of identity, may also turn pathological and destroy it.”¹⁶⁶ Eakin defines “hypernarrativa” as “a consciousness working overtime to make experience read like a story in a book.”¹⁶⁷ Sabbath’s hyper-awareness of himself as a performer, as an actor in the “theater” that is his immediate reality, is precisely demonstrative of this overworking. Sabbath’s dislocation of self, his perception of himself as “porous”, and his suicidal inclinations, can indeed be recognised as what Eakin describes as “the dark side of narrative identity”.¹⁶⁸

iv) “I can’t believe it! I don’t! I can die!” (ST, 32)

The realisation that human relationships are condemned to be desecrated by death pushes Sabbath towards an erotic impulse as his fleeing from death is enacted in the carrying out of erotic desire. Sabbath’s puppetry and his self-transformations cannot sustain themselves without the body and in this he is a precursor to the novels which deal explicitly with ageing; *The Dying Animal*, *Everyman*, and *Exit Ghost* are novels that develop the concept of the ageing self and which will be addressed in Chapter Five. Roth’s ideas of the self as corporeal, as transformative, and as linguistically formed come into collision here as Sabbath comes to realise that his penchant for self-invention has its limitations. If eros is what the self performs then thanatos is the final act of the body, and Sabbath is pulled between these impulses. However much Sabbath is compelled by the erotic he cannot change the body’s fate or get away from the story that the body contains. His aged body now leaves him feeling like an “empty vessel” and serves as a constant reminder that the self is condemned to die. Like Word Smith in *The Great American Novel* or indeed the unnamed narrator of *Everyman*, Sabbath now has to contend with death. “If only I didn’t have to die” says the eighty-seven-year-old Smitty, “O fans, it is so horrible being defunct, imagine, as I do, day in and day out

¹⁶⁵ Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, 130.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 131.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 130.

DEATH.”¹⁶⁹ Sabbath’s lover Drenka has a similar realisation of her own mortality when she is diagnosed with cancer: “I can’t believe it! I *don’t*! I can *die*!” (ST, 32). Drenka’s death confronts Sabbath with a frustrated awareness of failure and the recognition that he too has become “just someone who has grown ugly, old, and embittered, one of billions” (ST, 143).

Sabbath’s physical haunting by the ghost of his mother, who begins to appear to him with increasing regularity, is a further reminder of this. Sabbath reads these sightings as his initiation into death and the ghost of his mother urges him towards suicide. When he goes to New York to attend the funeral of his old friend Linc Gelman, who has committed suicide, he conceives of it as his journey towards the same end. This trip to New York becomes for Sabbath a symbolic return to his past. In the city where he once performed as a street artist he is brought back to the unresolved issues of his life, namely the disappearance of his first wife Nikki. Shostak points out that Nikki’s disappearance “creates an epistemological gap for Sabbath, who does not know whether she is living or dead.”¹⁷⁰ Shostak states, “Nikki, whose name echoes Mickey’s to suggest a doubling of him [...] leaves a tangible absence where there was always an ontological absence.”¹⁷¹ Thus, “when Nikki disappears, the event can be seen figuratively as Sabbath’s self-murder, since without her as his puppet, he has no stage on which to perform himself. From several directions he comes face to face with his own absence.”¹⁷² Nikki’s disappearance does in fact destabilise Sabbath’s concept of self. His relationship with Nikki is indicative of how he views himself in relation to others. Interestingly, when Sabbath begins to feel like he is losing his sense of self, he returns to a time when he was clearly in control, in particular, of those around him. During the episode of disorientation quoted above we are told that Sabbath “had the definite impression that they were rehearsing *The Cherry Orchard* even as he carefully took the coffee cup in one disfigured hand and paid with the other” (ST, 201). This temporal dislocation brings him back to a time when he knew himself mainly by exerting control over others, particularly in relation to Nikki: “his state of mind her state of mind, his sense of things her sense

¹⁶⁹ Roth, *The Great American Novel* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973; New York: Vintage, 1995), 9.

¹⁷⁰ Shostak, *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives*, 49.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 50.

of things” (ST, 201). Nikki’s disappearance confirms the extent to which identity is conceived of relationally but also reinforces the extent to which the other is unknowable. In the aftermath of Nikki’s disappearance, in order to distil the power of the unknown, Sabbath creates a number of possible outcomes for Nikki, in which as Shostak stresses he notably positions himself as her murderer. At one point he relates how he murdered her while they were rehearsing a scene from *Othello*: “In the scene in which he murders her I did it – I went ahead and murdered her. Got carried away by the spell of her acting” (ST, 242).

While Nikki’s disappearance may enact a form self-murder, he immediately replaces her with Roseanna who, in the course of their marriage, also fundamentally loses an authoritative sense of her own identity as she succumbs to alcoholism. Roseanna however, re-emerges through a programme of recovery and it is this re-emergence of a sense of self, one that is not fundamentally tied to Sabbath, which Sabbath finds most threatening. Sabbath’s instinctive impulse is to attempt to author not only himself but the other also. This is seen through his direction of Nikki and most tellingly in his confiscation of Roseanna’s journals and the binder that contains the letters written to her by her father. Sabbath pens a letter in the guise of Roseanna’s dead father in which he urges her to “write just a few thousand pages to grieving Papa to tell him how remorseful you are for everything you did to ruin his life” and signs off “Your father in Hell” (ST, 271-272). This authorial usurpation is tantamount to how Sabbath retains a potent sense of self when faced with the threat of the disappearing self.

The “epistemological gap” that Shostak speaks of is a notable feature of the American trilogy, with ontological security shown to be dependant on access to knowledge of the self and others.¹⁷³ Commenting on the unavoidability of epistemological uncertainty Sabbath suggests:

That’s all you could know, though if what you think happened happens to not ever match up with what somebody else thinks happened, how could you say you know even that? Everybody got everything wrong. (ST, 109)

¹⁷³ This is seen in the character of the Swede in *American Pastoral* and in Coleman Silk’s hiding of his racial identity in *The Human Stain*. It is central to the narrative technique of Zuckerman who narrates through a process of epistemological uncertainty.

This utterance, as we shall see, is echoed almost verbatim by Zuckerman in *American Pastoral* when commenting on the difficulty of knowing the Swede. And it is further stressed in *Sabbath's Theater* when the narrator states: "If it were Nikki listening instead of his mother, she would be shouting, 'It wasn't like that! I wasn't like that! You misunderstood!'" (ST, 109). Sabbath, like, Zuckerman, recognises the insufficiency of trying to account for the self or condense the self or the other into narrative.

v) "The-desire-not-to-be-alive" (ST, 191)

Sabbath's way of defeating death, the ultimate imposition upon the self, is to vow to be in control of his own exit. For Sabbath, committing suicide is the ultimate act of subjective and corporeal control. The second section of the book "To Be Or Not To Be," explicitly invokes the infamous meditation on suicide in Act Three, Scene One of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The narrator in the opening section of "To Be Or Not To Be" describes how Sabbath is intensely experiencing "the desire-not-to-be-alive-any-longer" (ST, 191). As Sabbath returns to New York where "nothing but the subway was subterranean anymore" (ST, 189), he is overcome with thoughts of his own suicide:

The-desire-not-to-be-alive-any-longer accompanied Sabbath right on down the station stairway and, after Sabbath purchased a token, continued through the turnstile clinging to his back; and when he boarded the train, it sat in his lap, facing him, and began to tick off on Sabbath's crooked fingers the many ways it could be sated. This little piggy slit his wrists, this little piggy used a dry-cleaning bag, this little piggy took sleeping pills, and this little piggy, born by the ocean, ran all the way out in the waves and drowned. (ST, 191)

At this point Sabbath begins to imagine his own obituary. Despite his desire not to be alive, his desire to be remembered is conveyed in his composition of no less than five possible obituaries, ranging in headings from "MORRIS SABBATH, PUPPETEER, 64, DIES" to "Pig or Perfectionist?," and "Did Nothing for Israel" (ST, 193-195); the titles then in themselves read like tongue-in-cheek parodies of headlines often attached to reviews of Roth's novels. The natural urge to be remembered, in whatever form that it takes, sends Sabbath into a tailspin, one which is reflected in an immediate shift in narrative style; as for approximately two pages, the narrative becomes a stream of consciousness, a parody of modernist

subjectivity as the narrator declares that, “Sabbath passeth the time, pretending to think without punctuation, the way J. Joyce pretended people thought, pretending to be both more and less unfixed than he felt” (*ST*, 198).

As Sabbath walks around New York revisiting places from his past and half expecting to find Nikki “down in a basement with a dot on her head selling saris or in her gypsy clothes roaming these streets of theirs in search of him” (*ST*, 198), he becomes more and more deranged and loses any foothold he may have had on his sense of reality. Sabbath, we are told, was:

a caricature of himself and entirely himself, embracing the truth and blind to the truth, [...] ex-son, ex-brother, ex-husband, ex-puppet-artist without any idea what he now was or what he was seeking, whether it was to slide headlong into the stairwells with the substrata of bums or to succumb like a man to the-desire-not-to-be-alive-any-longer (*ST*, 198).

Sabbath’s self-knowledge is depleted and he has become defined by abnegation and absence, “ex-brother, ex-husband, ex-puppet-artist”. He is a self that is neither here nor there, inhabiting an in-between place of existence; between being and not-being, self and non-self. After this description the narrative switches back once again to Sabbath’s childhood on the Jersey shore. From the disappearance of Nikki to the death of Morty, Sabbath’s self-division and his move into self-abnegation, is shown to be a direct result of what and who he has lost. Despite the narrator’s suggestion that when Nikki disappeared he was “as delighted as a young man could be. A trap door had opened and Nikki was gone” (*ST*, 198), her disappearance and Sabbath’s inability to know the truth surrounding it has invariably led to Sabbath’s haunted self.

Sabbath’s longing for death manifests itself in the need to reconnect with his past and re-establish a connection with those whom he has lost. When he makes his way to the graveyard where his family is buried he exhibits a palpable desire to belong to his generational and biographical line. Among the graves and the prospect of locating his family plot we are told that Sabbath “felt himself at last inside his life, like someone who after a long illness, steps back into his shoes for the first time” (*ST*, 357). When he finds his family plot, his response is fundamental to his sense of being:

and the walls of embitterment were crashing down; the surface of something long unexposed – Sabbath’s soul? the film of his soul? – was illuminated by

happiness. As close as a substanceless substance can come to being physically caressed. “They’re *there!* All in the ground *there* – yes, living together there like a family of field mice. (ST, 357)

The “surface of something long unexposed” suggests that Sabbath has kept an integral part of himself hidden behind his various acts of ventriloquism. While this is true of any individual projection of self, as Giddens’s description of self-identity suggests, the cost to Sabbath has resulted in an unappeasable longing for a recovery of the past and the dead that are buried with it. But Sabbath’s attempt to reintegrate himself into that past through suicide and burial in the family plot leads to further disappointment because there is no place left for him: “Why does life refuse me even the *grave* I want!” (ST, 359). Sabbath, the narrator states, “had *still* to learn that nothing but *nothing* will ever turn out – and this obtuseness was, in itself, a deep, deep shock” (ST, 359).

Sabbath’s inability to commit suicide without making provisions for his burial is indicative of his need to leave something permanent in the world. When he cannot secure a grave next to his family the caretaker suggests a plot by the road, telling Sabbath that “Somebody going past would see your stone. Two roads join up there. Traffic from two directions” (ST, 360). Leaving a testament to his existence is vital for Sabbath. For Roth this urge to be remembered is an ongoing aspect of what it means to be alive and this remembering is fundamentally linked to the process of narrative. Roth particularly explored this idea in *Patrimony*, as discussed in Chapter One, where Roth’s own near brush with death brought him closer to his father while giving him an acute awareness of his own mortality. The text of *Patrimony* stands as an epitaph to Roth’s father, an act of remembering and an exploration of the responsibility that act involves. To be remembered is to lessen the sense of finality that the prospect of death brings. Sabbath, however, has nothing to leave behind. Childless, he has no patrimony to pass on: “I have no children. I haven’t generated shit” (ST, 289). It is interesting to note here Roth’s use of the term shit, a word heavily intoned with genealogical meaning in *Patrimony* where according to Roth, “*that* [the shit] was the Patrimony. And not because cleaning it up was symbolic of something else but because it wasn’t, because it was nothing more than the lived reality that it was” (PTS, 176). But the only evidence Sabbath leaves of his existence is the grave and the monument he

purchases, and even that is not done with his own money. The obituaries he composes are attempts to account for his life, but as seen above they are cynical interpretations on the summation of a human life.

While standing outside the funeral home where his friend had been eulogised, Sabbath reads a sign asking “What is a monument?” (*ST*, 375) and, in the construction of his own monument, he undermines the advertisement’s avowal that a monument is “a symbol of devotion [...] built because there was a life, not a death [...] it should speak out as a voice from yesterday and today to the ages yet unborn” (*ST*, 375). Sabbath’s posthumous summation, like his obituaries, is a raucous rebuttal of the advertisement’s claim that the monument is “a tangible expression of the noblest of all human emotions – LOVE” (*ST*, 375):

Morris Sabbath
“Mickey”
Beloved Whoremonger, Seducer,
Sodomist, Abuser of Women,
Destroyer of Morals, Ensnarer of Youth,
Uxoricide,
Suicide
1929-1994 (*ST*, 376)

Sabbath’s alternative epitaph undermines the idea of narrative as a “record of the self” (*ST*, 447) and presents Sabbath, together with his radical self-performances as an individual that is attempting to be anti-autobiographical; to work against the narratives that surround him. The correlation of monument with identity brings to mind de Man’s association of self-narrative and epitaph and Sabbath’s undoing of this epitaphic clause further discounts Shostak’s claim that Sabbath expresses an urge “towards autobiographical acts, toward making somehow permanent the vanishing self.”¹⁷⁴ As discussed in Chapter One, de Man suggests that any attempt to write the self in narrative only confirms an absence of self, inscribing a fiction that signals the de-facement of the actual subject. When Sabbath discovers that Drenka kept a diary he thinks, “the self in its true untrammelled existence [...] Yes, such diaries have a privileged place among one’s skeletons; one cannot easily free oneself of words themselves finally freed from their daily duty to justify and conceal” (*ST*, 447). Sabbath suggests that the diary is the “self at Mardi Gras” (*ST*, 447), a form of self-narrative that shouts “This was who was living under all the

¹⁷⁴ Shostak, *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives*, 181.

nice clothes – and none of you ever knew!” (ST, 447). But the reader should keep in mind Roth’s comment that the “the first person singular may be the best mask of all for a second self” (RMAO, 125). The diary can never fully reveal the self, especially when it is written to be read. Sabbath of all people should know this. As he watches Drenka on her death bed, reading the narrative of her ailing body he thinks: “Just the shard of the story now and the shards of her English, just bits of the core of the apple that was Drenka – only that was left” (ST, 424).

vi) “the perverse senselessness of just remaining”(ST, 384)

After securing his plot Sabbath makes his way from the graveyard, and at this point, the narrator states: “But he could think of no further procrastination that he might construe as a symbolic act of closure; the great big act that will conclude my story” (ST, 376). The “great big act”, however, is pushed aside again as Sabbath happens upon the house where Cousin Fish lived. On discovering that Fish is still alive, Sabbath’s plans for self-annihilation are put on temporary, and possibly permanent hold, as in Fish’s house he happens upon his mother’s old sideboard and reveres it for what it can return to him of the past: “inside that sideboard was everything he had come looking for. [...] Something is there that is not my mother’s ghost: She’s down in the grave with her ghost. Something is here as important and as palpable as the sun that turns Fish brown” (ST, 392). In the sideboard Sabbath discovers a sort of patrimony when he finds a carton containing Morty’s belongings. He distracts Fish and steals the carton and garners for himself what he can of this immediate access to the past.

For Sabbath, Fish is another symbol of the past and proof that life amounts to little in the end. He callously uses him for his own purpose and goads him into remembering the past so he can solidify a sense of his own existence. “Push [him],” Sabbath thinks, “I remember Morty. Morty. Mickey. Yetta. Sam. He can say it. Get him to do it” (ST, 390). Fish also brings home to Sabbath the misery of not wanting to die. Fish tells Sabbath that death “is a terrible thing. Death, it’s no good. So I wish I was never born” (ST, 396). In response, Sabbath thinks, “I want to die because I don’t have to, *he* doesn’t want to die because he does have to” (ST, 396). Despite Sabbath’s self-centred interest in Fish, he is moved by him, however reluctantly and thinks, “This must be the veneration that the Chinese have for the

old" (ST, 392). He is also enthralled by Fish's refusal to give in to death: "The incapacity to die. Sitting it out instead. This thought made Sabbath intensely excited: *the perverse senselessness of just remaining, of not going on*" (ST, 384).

The discovery of Morty's possessions sends Sabbath into a spiral of grief. Wrapped in the American flag he finds folded in the bottom of the carton, the one that was draped over Morty's coffin, Sabbath walks the beach "chanting aloud words and sentences inexplicable even to himself [...] raving about Morty, about the brother, about the one loss he would never bull his way through" (ST, 407). Sabbath continues like this until:

he'd thought that the frenzy was over and that he had regained possession of 1994. He figured the only thing that could ever swallow him up like that again would have to be the ocean. And all from only a single carton. Imagine, then, the history of the world. We are immoderate because grief is immoderate, all the hundreds and thousands of kinds of grief. (ST, 407)

Sabbath, "whoremonger and seducer", now drapes himself in the American flag and chants Whitmanesque on the Jersey shore. "How heavy a flag is!" (ST, 407) he thinks as he "wrapped himself in it [...] and wept and wept" (ST, 407). Sabbath's ire is of course directed against America and is consolidated in the novel's final sentence that confirms to the reader that "Everything he hated was here" (ST, 451). The distaste he feels toward the prurient atmosphere of nineties America and his disengagement with history is born from the intrusion of history into his life. This is a fate that the Swede is also victim of, as we shall see in relation to *American Pastoral*, where he becomes "history's plaything" (AP, 87).

Sabbath recalls the excitement of having Morty join up for the air force and the pride his family felt for having a type of hero in the family. Yet Morty's death brings a desolate blow that even the young Sabbath cannot address. The narrator recalls how in the months following Morty's death, Sabbath cocooned himself in a false reality where he refused to tell people that his brother had been killed. Regarding the loss Sabbath states:

I felt I had lost a part of my body. Not my prick, no, can't say a leg, an arm, but a feeling that was physiological yet an interior loss. A hollowing out, as though I'd been worked on with a chisel. Like the horseshoe-crab shells lying along the beach, the armature intact and the inside empty. All of it gone. Hollowed out. Reamed out. Chiseled away. (ST, 298)

This loss is indicative of the relational identity Sabbath shares with Morty. The loss of his brother instigates a feeling of emptiness, one that eventually leaves Sabbath feeling utterly porous. Once wrapped in the flag that consolidated Morty's futureless existence, Sabbath decides to "Never take it off" (ST, 413). Consequently, by the time Sabbath drapes himself in the American flag he has dispensed with the belief in the transformative power of dress:

Dressing like this made not a scrap of difference to anything, transformed nothing, abated nothing, neither merged him with what was gone nor separated him from what was here, and yet he was determined to never again dress otherwise (ST, 413).

Sabbath combines the wearing of the American flag that draped Morty's coffin with a yarmulke, bringing together in one transgressive pastiche, the assimilationist's dream and the nightmarish price of patriotism.

Having come into possession of Morty's things Sabbath asks, "How could he kill himself now that he had Morty's things? Something always came along to make you keep living, god damnit!" (ST, 415). In Sabbath's case it is the repossession and recovery of the past and subsequently of the dead:

The blade head of the electric shaver contained particles of Morty's beard. In the case with the clarinet pieces was the reed. The reed from Morty's lips. Only inches from Sabbath, in the toilet case stamped "MS," was the comb with which Morty had combed his hair and the scissors with which Morty had clipped his nails. [...] And in his Midget Diary Year 1939, under August 26, "Mickey's birthday" written in Morty's hand. (ST, 415)

As well as reconnecting Sabbath with Morty, the diary entry marking Sabbath's birthday reconfirms his own existence: "He cannot walk into the waves" because he cannot "leave this stuff behind" (ST, 415). Yet, even if Sabbath does not fully recognise it, he also cannot walk into the waves because the contents of Morty's carton reveal, like the graveyard does for Roth in *Patrimony*, that although one can remember what the dead were like, "nothing is altered by these recollections, except that the dead seem even more distant and out of reach" (PTS, 21).

In what seems to be a retaliation of such sentiment, Sabbath uses the graveyard and Drenka's grave to re-enact the sexually tabooed act they had performed on each other while together. He urinates upon her grave: "To drill a hole in her grave. To drive through the coffin's lid to Drenka's mouth!" (ST, 444).

But despite his attempts, however depraved, Sabbath “could never again reach her in any way” (ST, 444). “And did he think otherwise, the anti-illusionist?” (ST, 445) asks the narrator, who then, in words once again echoing Roth’s sentiment in *Patrimony*, states:

Well, it is sometimes hard even for people with the best intentions to remember twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, three hundred and sixty-five days a year that nobody dead can live again. There’s nothing on earth more firmly established, it’s all you can know for sure – and no one wants to know it. (ST, 445)

And Sabbath knows, despite how many times he urinates or masturbates upon Drenka’s grave, that he cannot “bring her back, either Drenka or anyone else” (ST, 445). This knowledge is what ultimately strengthens his urge to die. “For anybody who loves a joke” Sabbath thinks, “suicide is indispensable” and, for a puppeteer

there is nothing more natural: disappear behind the screen, insert the hand, and instead of performing as yourself, take the finale as the puppet. Think about it. There is no more thoroughly amusing way to go. A man wants to die. A living being choosing death. That’s entertainment. (ST, 443)

While Sabbath thinks at this point that to “die of natural causes would be the unsurpassable insult” (ST, 443), he is still unable to take any definite action and thinks:

What had happened to his entire conception of life? [...] Where was the contempt with which he had overridden their hatred; where were the laws, the code of conduct, by which he had labored to be free from their stupidly harmonious expectations? Yes, the strictures that had inspired his buffoonery were taking their vengeance at last. (ST, 441)

So while Sabbath may be experiencing an ontological breakdown, he is still very much alive and ironically finds himself in the same position as Fish: “The incapacity to die. Sitting it out instead” (ST, 384). The anti-climatic ending, anti-climatic in the sense that the narrative drive towards Sabbath’s suicide is unfulfilled, re-establishes the notion of ineffectualness. In spite of the seriousness of his meditations throughout “To Be Or Not To Be” Sabbath ultimately procrastinates to a point beyond his desire to kill himself.

When Drenka's son, a local policeman, finds him urinating on his mother's grave and subsequently arrests him, the narrator reveals that Sabbath "had not realized how very long he'd been longing to be put to death. He hadn't committed suicide, because he'd been waiting to be murdered" (ST, 450). Sabbath, however, merely finds himself kicked out of the police car and left "ankle-deep in the pudding of the springtime mud, [...] with no one to kill him except himself" (ST, 451). Thus Sabbath at last finds himself in the earth but he is very much alive and left with only the realisation that he cannot actually bring himself to join the dead. His desire has not been for death but for those who have died to still be alive; a longing for the life they have missed and, by association, the life he has missed with them. After reading Morty's letters, with his handwriting "like a glimpse of Morty himself" (ST, 407), Sabbath thinks, "He would be seventy. We would be celebrating his birthday. Only for a while was all this to be his, a very little while" (ST, 412). It is "all this" which Sabbath cannot let go of; life in all its unruly and irrational existence.

II. *American Pastoral*

i) "my Swede was not the primary Swede" (AP, 76)

In *American Pastoral*, the Pulitzer-Prize-winning, first instalment to his American Trilogy, Roth employs the familiar voice of Nathan Zuckerman with a markedly different teleology to his previous appearances within Roth's novels. Roth describes Zuckerman as his "insider", "his knowledge wedge into the Swede's life".¹⁷⁵ While Zuckerman is no longer presented as the central character in the novel, he remains the "mediating intelligence"¹⁷⁶ through which readers access the novel's protagonist. Roth has said that availing of Zuckerman like this "solved the problem of how to launch the book" adding that "[o]n page 90 I jettisoned Zuckerman—he was no longer necessary".¹⁷⁷ Shostak has called Roth's

¹⁷⁵ Roth, "Zuckerman's Alter Brain", interview by Charles McGrath, *The New York Times*, 7 May 2000. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2000/05/07/books/interview-zuckerman-s-alter-brain.html>> [accessed August 2009].

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

method here a “Chinese box [...] of consciousness”,¹⁷⁸ while Ross Posnock has described *American Pastoral* as possibly “the loneliest novel Roth has ever written” on account of its “inwardness” and complete submersion into the consciousness of its “pastoral hero”.¹⁷⁹ This “inwardness” brought about by Roth’s decision to “jettison” Zuckerman is executed with such subtlety that readers often forget that within the text of *American Pastoral* it is Zuckerman who is inventing the events relayed throughout.

In this way *American Pastoral* uses Zuckerman and the figure of the writer as a means of once again engaging with the concept of representing selves through the act of narrative and story-telling and the weight of responsibility that is consequently entailed in representing an identity that is or has been known to the writer-figure. The reader may be drawn back to the sections in *Deception* where “Philip” discusses the problems facing the biographer. This concept of engaging with a figure in some way known or related to the writer was previously encountered in *Patrimony*, where Roth attempts to write his father’s story. In *American Pastoral*, Zuckerman now faces a similar feeling of obligation towards the subject he is attempting to represent and understand through the act of writing. Thus, the figure of the writer and the process of narration carries a greater weight in *American Pastoral* and in the American trilogy as a whole than it did, for example, in the *Zuckerman Bound* trilogy where writing is seen as a much more narcissistic process. In *American Pastoral*, the writer functions more outwardly, handling someone else’s story and seeking an analysis of self through the exploration of another.

The Swede comes to Zuckerman precisely because of his narrative capabilities. He asks Zuckerman to assist him in composing a tribute to his father. Zuckerman instead begins to think about the Swede’s narrative potentialities, and gradually becomes engrossed in fleshing out his biography. But the biography he composes is one of speculation and invention. Zuckerman’s acknowledgement of this is worth quoting in full:

I would have been willing to admit that my Swede was not the primary Swede. Of course I was working with traces; of course essentials of what he was to Jerry were gone, expunged from my portrait, things I was ignorant of

¹⁷⁸ Shostak, *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives*, 181.

¹⁷⁹ Posnock, *Philip Roth’s Rude Truth*, 103.

or didn't want; of course the Swede was concentrated differently in my pages from how he'd been concentrated in the flesh. But whether that meant I'd imagined an outright fantastical creature, lacking entirely the unique substantiality of the real thing; whether that meant my conception of the Swede was any more fallacious than the conception held by Jerry [...] whether the Swede and his family came to life in me any less truthfully than in his brother – Well who knows? Who can know? When it comes to illuminating someone with the Swede's opacity, to understanding those regular guys everybody likes and who go about more or less incognito, it's up for grabs it seems to me, as to whose guess is more rigorous than whose. (AP, 76-77)

This paragraph describes the precise problem of laying claim to "truth" or authenticity in narrativised representations of identity. Zuckerman stresses the *imaginative* aspect in his attempt to illuminate the Swede's "opacity" (AP, 77), but concedes that the narrative presented can only ever be a conjectural inquiry, one that predicates itself on getting people wrong:

The fact remains that getting people right is not what living is about anyway. It's getting them wrong that is living, getting them wrong and wrong and wrong and then, on careful reconsideration, getting them wrong again. (AP, 35)

Despite this recognition, Zuckerman is still driven by a sense of urgency to write about the Swede because it is the "terribly significant business of *other people*" (AP, 35) and our very inability to "envision one another's interior workings" (AP, 35) that engages him as a writer. Consequently the Swede becomes a source of fascination for Zuckerman because he poses a challenge to his creative ability: "I couldn't imagine him at all" (AP, 30). The Swede's "blandness" (AP, 23) frustrates his attempts to visualise his interior life: "I had no idea where his thoughts may be or even if he had 'thoughts'" (AP, 34).

Zuckerman's "professional impatience", his instinct to turn "real people" into "word people" (AP, 35), leads him to persist in his meditation on the Swede. In order to counter the "apparent blankness" (AP, 74) of the Swede, Zuckerman attempts to imbue him "with something like the tendentious meaning Tolstoy assigned to Ivan Ilych" (AP, 30). Zuckerman's equation of the Swede's with the ordinariness of Tolstoy's Ivan Ilych whose life, according to Tolstoy, and quoted within Roth's text by Zuckerman, "*had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible*" (AP, 31). Zuckerman is less keen to "belittle" (AP, 31) his subject by pronouncing a similar judgement and adjusts Tolstoy's words so that

they counteract the tone of Tolstoy's "uncharitable story" (AP, 31): "*Swede Levov's life, for all I knew, had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore just great, right in the American grain*" (AP, 31). Tolstoy's pronouncement is, as Zuckerman states, an uncharitable comment. Within *American Pastoral* however, a life "most ordinary" is all that Zuckerman's Swede desires. In light of the life Zuckerman subsequently imagines for the Swede, his comment here seems pointedly ironic.

ii) The "terribly significant business of other people" (AP, 35)

Accessing the Swede's story throughout *American Pastoral* becomes a way for Zuckerman to revisit his own past. The move into the past is not one that Zuckerman takes lightly, as the opening stages of the novel demonstrate. After attending his school reunion Zuckerman sits down to write a speech encapsulating the spirit of his childhood, "a speech to myself, masked as a speech to them" (AP, 44). The speech is Zuckerman's own veneration of the pastoral and of the rewards fettered to assimilation:

We had new means and new ends, new allegiances and new aims, new innards – a new *ease* somewhat less agitation in facing down the exclusions the goyim still wished to preserve [...] Just what collided with what to produce the spark in us? I was still awake and all stirred up, formulating these questions and their answers [...] some eight hours after I'd driven back from New Jersey (AP, 44-45).

At this point Zuckerman states, "I was biography in perpetual motion, memory to the marrow of my bones" (AP, 45). Instead of recapturing the past however, he suggests that he had been "captured by it in the present, so that passing seemingly out of the world of time I was, in fact, rocketing through to its secret core" (AP, 45). At the "secret core" is the "apprehensiveness of death" of which Zuckerman is fundamentally aware (AP, 47). Recovering from prostate cancer, which has left him impotent, incontinent, and feeling ever nearer to death, the reunion leaves an indelible impression of the "desperate desire — to forestall death, to resist it, to resort whatever means are necessary to see death with anything, *anything* but clarity" (AP, 47).

The story that Zuckerman actually imagines for the Swede is one of sustaining a built-up pretence; of a consciousness desperately clinging to the story he envisioned for his own life. *American Pastoral*, like *Sabbath's Theater*, displays an anxiety about the loss and disappearance of the self. The narrative structure of the novel and Zuckerman's integral but peripheral position in the text conveys this central theme as Zuckerman, like the Swede, disappears in the course of the narrative. His subjectivity becomes interchangeable with that of the Swede's as he becomes consumed to the point of invisibility in the invention of the Swede's story:

I would [...] think about the Swede for six, eight, sometimes ten hours at a stretch, exchange my solitude for his, inhabit this person least like myself, disappear into him, day and night try to take the measure of a person of apparent blankness and innocence and simplicity, chart his collapse, make of him, as time wore on, the most important figure of my life. (*AP*, 74)

His invention, ironically, is an attempt to get beyond appearance and performance but, as Debra Shostak notes, the novel reveals that “[t]he vanishing act is the only act the self can perform.”¹⁸⁰ Like *Sabbath's Theater*, at the heart of *American Pastoral* lies an epistemological void. As Shostak notes, “[t]he vanishing subject becomes the central concern of *American Pastoral*”¹⁸¹; an insistence on the limitation of knowledge that is connected to an instability of self-identity.

On being met with the personification of American success in the form of the Swede, Zuckerman is forced to ask, “Where was the Jew in him? [...] Where was the irrationality in him? Where was the crybaby? Where were the wayward temptations?” (*AP*, 20). Zuckerman attempts to fill this void in his own life with the narrative of Swede Levov that arises from these interrogations. Roth replicates this search in the novel by having the Swede, like Sabbath, try to fill the epistemological breach that surrounds the disappearance of Merry. Zuckerman's exploration of the Swede is thus a mirroring of the frantic conjectures he imagines the Swede arriving at as to why Merry turned out the way she did. But Zuckerman, unlike the character he imagines, realises that the possibility of knowing is “a dazzling illusion empty of all perception” (*AP*, 35). Zuckerman's initial meeting

¹⁸⁰ Shostak, *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives*, 182.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 181.

with the Swede confirms for him the difficulty involved in imagining another's interior life:

I couldn't imagine him at all, having come down with my own strain of the Swede's disorder: the inability to draw conclusions about anything but exteriors. This guy cannot be cracked by thinking. That's the mystery of his mystery. It's like trying to get something out of Michelangelo's David. (AP, 30)

In the epistemological search that the novel enacts, the idea that there is merely a void at the centre of identity threatens a stable sense of self for both Zuckerman who, as aforementioned, disappears in the text and for the Swede who loses hold of a secure sense of self. Zuckerman is "along for the ride" (AP, 35). He vampirically subsumes the story of the Swede in the hope that his "attempts to come up with the missing piece that would make the Swede whole" (AP, 37) will impact upon his own attempts to "forestall death" (AP, 47) by sustaining his own self through the narrative of an other.

The idea of biographical control also emerges here. As Zuckerman listens to his classmates reminisce, he comments on their conflicting "sense of the-way-it-was" (AP, 55). Jerry's version of the Swede is solidified in line with his own narcissism. He not only tells Nathan who he is, but puts forward a version of the Swede that has little or no room for alternative view points or considerations. Zuckerman, true to character, is willing to undermine the very idea that a life can be summarised in narrative. His "history" (AP, 62), as he delivers it to his classmates, is an amusing parody of the auto-biographical summaries he criticised in *The Facts*:

I'm Nathan Zuckerman. I was vice president of our class in 4B and a member of the prom committee. I have neither child nor grandchild but I did, ten years ago, have a quintuple bypass operation of which I'm proud. Thank you. (AP, 62)

Afterwards, considering the "picture we have of one another", he confides to Jerry: "Layers and layers of misunderstanding. [...] Useless. Presumptuous. Completely cocked-up. Only we go ahead and we *live* by these pictures" (AP, 65). This summation conveys the frustration of the biographer, especially when the history of his subject is complicated by the immediate link with his own past and his

recognition of how, as a child, he had “seriously [...] fallen in love” with the Swede (*AP*, 70).

Zuckerman guesses that he sees the motivation behind Jerry’s need to control the way in which his brother is perceived:

Jerry said it and it happened. It’s Jerry’s theory that the Swede is nice, that is to say passive, that is to say trying always to do the right thing, a socially controlled character who doesn’t burst out, doesn’t yield to rage ever [...] According to this theory, it’s the no rage that kills him in the end. (*AP*, 72)

Jerry’s theory, however, is also about the suppression of story. He has the digestible version of the Swede. The one which has him marked as “a big, sweet, agreeable putz” (*AP*, 74) and establishes him as a forerunner in the good-guy idealism that Cooper speaks of and that Sabbath, who has “let the whole creature out”, rebels against (*ST*, 344).

Jerry’s version of the Swede also attempts to account for Merry who he has steadfastly declared as the family’s monster. Jerry provides very little insight into her motivation or character other than the opinion that she was a “miserable, self-righteous – little shit” who was “no good from the time she was born” (*AP*, 69). He even attempts to impose his dismissal of her onto the Swede. The story that Zuckerman imagines is about looking back into this suppressed story and using narrative to explore possible avenues of truth. The very form that the narrative takes is based upon this act of recovery. The class reunion firmly establishes this and with it comes the unearthing of stories. Zuckerman looks back in a way that Jerry refuses to; giving a story to the Swede, and to Merry, that attempts to get beyond one person’s account or one person’s picture of who someone else is. The story that he unfolds explores the very essence of story itself. The stories we tell ourselves or deny; the stories we suppress and reveal.

iii)“Everything he loved was here” (*AP*, 213)

As Zuckerman pieces together the biography of the Swede’s life, the notion of constructing identities through readily available narratives emerges. Through Zuckerman, the Swede is immediately identified with the act of fiction-making and narrative investment. Looking back, Zuckerman now begins to view the Swede within the parameters of pre-approved models of identity. Zuckerman elevates him

to such an extent that he refers to him as “our Kennedy” (*AP*, 83), unequivocally aligning him with a pre-established symbol of American greatness. Zuckerman relates how his whole community invested in the invention of a local hero. The Swede, by his very physicality, inspired fantasies of assimilation, fantasies of a successful American identity free from the confines of ethnic ties:

Of the few fair-complexioned Jewish students in our preponderantly Jewish public high school, none possessed anything remotely like the steep-jawed insentient Viking mask of this blue-eyed blond born into our tribe as Seymour Irving Levov. (*AP*, 3)

This idea of perfection becomes continually associated with the Swede as Zuckerman directly positions him within fictions that demonstrate the national character; a character that became embodied in the “elevation of Swede Levov into the household Apollo of the Weequahic Jews” (*AP*, 4). Unlike Sabbath, who performs his identity *against* such pastoral constructions, the Swede is defined and defines himself within them without any apparent sense of irony. Zuckerman imagined the Swede to be the heroic sports-hero from the baseball book *The Kid from Tomkinsville*. The Swede, within *American Pastoral*, identifies himself with “Johnny Appleseed”:

Johnny Appleseed, that’s the man for me. Wasn’t a Jew, wasn’t an Irish Catholic, wasn’t a Protestant Christian—nope, Johnny Appleseed was just a happy American. Big. Ruddy. Happy. (*AP*, 316)

The Swede’s need to graft his identity from such pre-established models of cultural identity is presented almost to the point of caricature here. This could indeed be said of many of the characters in *American Pastoral*. Both Dawn and Merry, for example, conform to recognisable stereotypes; Dawn as the “beauty-pageant” wife of the successful, equally handsome husband and Merry as the troubled and rebellious daughter of successful parents. When David Remnick in interview with Roth pointed to the possibility of these characters being perceived as stereotypes, Roth confirmed that they were intentionally portrayed as such, so that the contrast of their subjectivities before and after the moment of crisis would render precisely the “shock of the moment.”¹⁸² This is exactly what that characterisation achieves, as the shock becomes manifest in each of these

¹⁸² Roth, “Philip Roth at 70”, interview by David Remnick, (2003).

characters, crippling their hold on their pre-prescribed roles. Eakin calls his analysis of written lives, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, and points to the difficulty of claiming an autonomous self. *American Pastoral* consents to this very idea but can also be said to invert it, making it more an illustration of how stories have actually become the basis for our identity. This concept is magnified in Roth's text as the characters willingly step into the narrative of their respective American story.

In order to elucidate this idea I want to draw a comparison between Roth's Swede and the character of the Swede in Stephen Crane's "The Blue Hotel." Crane's story is an exemplary display of how the inverse of Eakin's phrase can operate. Crane's story precisely illustrates how national narratives can be a principal resource for identity formation. Crane's Swede grafts his identity from the gung-ho narratives of the dime-store novel. His reality and his idea of America are based upon his inflated sense of these narratives. Like Roth, Crane reveals how his Swede's access to reality is barred by an inability to deflate his imaginary concept of himself and his surrounding environment. His behaviour in Scully's hotel is essentially indebted to the American myth of the West. The notion of the West as a place of freedom and lawlessness immediately puts the Swede on guard. When he partakes in a game of cards he suspects Scully's son Johnnie of cheating. A fight ensues in which the Swede beats Johnnie. The text reveals how, in Scully's hotel, the Swede is encased in a performative narrative of masculinity: "His entrance was made theatric. He swept the door back with a bang and swaggered to the middle of the room."¹⁸³ Although geographically the Swede is not even beyond the frontier (Scully's hotel is in Nebraska), Crane's Swede connects the unfamiliar surrounding with the image of the West that has been bred in his imagination. He "swaggers" and "ruffl[es] out his chest like a rooster."¹⁸⁴ Crane's Swede subsequently meets with tragedy and is killed in a barroom brawl on account of this inflated narrative of self. After leaving Scully's hotel he enters a saloon and begins to "boast loudly" of how he "thumped the soul out of a man down here at Scully's hotel."¹⁸⁵ The text conveys that Crane's Swede, like Roth's own character, pays dearly for sustaining his particular fiction of self. After he is stabbed by a

¹⁸³ Stephen Crane, "The Blue Hotel", *Great Short Works of Stephen Crane* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 346.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 351.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 349.

gambler in the saloon the text describes how the Swede's eyes as he lay upon the floor were "fixed upon a dreadful legend that dwelt atop of the cash-machine: 'This registers the amount of your purchase.'"¹⁸⁶

However, as Marston LaFrance remarks, "The Blue Hotel" focuses on the "failure of human responsibility and understanding among the men whom the Swede encounters."¹⁸⁷ At the end of the story it emerges that Johnnie, whom the Swede had accused of cheating, was in fact cheating and was known to be doing so by the other card players. These players nonetheless allowed the fight to take place, the fight that led the Swede to leave Scully's hotel for the saloon in which he is subsequently killed. Instead of confirming the Swede's suspicions about Johnnie's cheating, they confirm his preconceived notions of the West as a place of danger and lawlessness; a place in which he must script himself in accordance with these notions. In this, he is as I would suggest Roth's Swede is, willingly scripting himself in line with culturally simulated fictions of identity which that culture ultimately wishes to sustain. "The Blue Hotel" and *American Pastoral* both end ambiguously. The resounding line from Crane's characters is one of shifting blame as the Easterner tries to explain to the cowboy that they are privy to the Swede's death because they allowed Johnnie to cheat: "Every sin is a result of a collaboration. We, five of us, have collaborated in the murder of the Swede."¹⁸⁸ The cowboy protesting his innocence states: "Well, I didn't do anythin', did I?"¹⁸⁹ This protest however, reconfirms the Easterner's claim that the Swede dies precisely because they "didn't do anything" to prevent his death. Crane's story, like *American Pastoral*, can be read as an elucidating example of how individuals often tragically script themselves in line with cultural models of identity.

In *American Pastoral*, Zuckerman's enthrallment with the Swede's story is testament to the very appeal and effect of national stories on the American individual as the text questions the very nature of success, in particular, the culturally sanctioned success story. It is also notable that when Zuckerman conceives of the ideal, this is what he imagines. His invention of the Swede therefore can be said to belie his own fantasies or anxieties regarding the American

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 352.

¹⁸⁷ Marston LaFrance, *A Reading of Stephen Crane* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 221-222.

¹⁸⁸ Stephen Crane, "The Blue Hotel", 354.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.,

dream, particularly the dream of assimilation. The Swede's loyalty is not to the Jewish aspect of his hyphenated existence but to the American. As he tells Jerry:

Nobody dominates anybody anymore. Our parents are not attuned to the postwar world, where people can live in harmony, all sorts of people side by side no matter what their origins. This is a new generation and there is no need for that resentment stuff from anybody, them or us. (*AP*, 311)

The Swede's move to Morris County reveals a longing to move himself deeper into the American grain, to be "out on the frontier" (*AP*, 307). Embracing the frontier myth, the Swede tries to "get as far out west in New Jersey as he could" (*AP*, 307):

the Swede, rather like some frontiersman of old, would not be turned back [...] he was settling Revolutionary New Jersey as if for the first time. Out in old Rimrock, all of America lay at their door. That was an idea he loved. (*AP*, 310)

The Swede wants to "own a piece of America" because, he tells Dawn "[t]hat's what being an American is—isn't it?" (*AP*, 315). Yet, according to the Swede's logic, owning a piece of America entails a privileging of homogeneity and a refusal to acknowledge anything that counters the idea of what "being an American is". In Morris County his claim to ownership is subtly undercut by his encounter with Bill Orcutt, his quintessential Gentile, genteel, neighbour. The Swede fundamentally associates Orcutt with the possession and ownership of place. As a result of his knowledge of Morris County, the Swede refers to Orcutt as a "walking encyclopedia" (*AP*, 304). He brings the Swede on a day-long tour which ends up in a church cemetery that dates back to the Revolution. There he shows Swede the grave of the first Orcutt of Morris County. The Swede describes the tour as "a lesson in American History" (*AP*, 306), is made to feel "ignorant" (*AP*, 304), and simultaneously realises that:

his family couldn't compete with Orcutt's when it came to ancestors—they would have run out of ancestors in about two minutes. As soon as you got back earlier than Newark, back to the old country, no one knew anything. But Orcutt could spin out ancestors forever. Every rung into America for the Levovs there was another rung to attain; this guy was *there*. (*AP*, 306)

In Rimrock the Swede stops playing football because he feels pressurised by a team-mate who keeps trying to "haul him in for the Morristown Jewish

community” (AP, 314). The Swede tells Dawn: “I didn’t come out here for that stuff” (AP, 314). Recalling his father’s trips to the synagogue on “High Holidays,” the Swede says that “seeing my father there never made sense. It wasn’t him, it wasn’t like him – he was bending to something that he didn’t have to” (AP, 314). In contrast the Swede states: “I go to those synagogues and it’s all foreign to me” (AP, 315). Interestingly, when faced with someone who identifies as Jewish and not just American he feels more like the genteel Bill Orcutt: “With Robinson [his Jewish teammate] he did not feel like his father – he felt like Orcutt” (AP, 315). Despite the Swede’s claim that Orcutt is no different, when faced with the difference that Robinson represents in relation to how the Swede conceives or fails to conceive of his Jewish identity, the Swede automatically turns to someone who encapsulates his ideal American identity. From here the Swede moves further into his American story when he envisages himself as Johnny Appleseed:

Who cares about Bill Orcutt? Woodrow Wilson knew Orcutt’s father? Thomas Jefferson knew his grandfather’s uncle? Good for Bill Orcutt. Johnny Appleseed, that’s the man for me. Wasn’t a Jew, wasn’t an Irish Catholic, wasn’t a Protestant Christian – nope, Johnny Appleseed was just a happy American. Big. Ruddy. Happy. [...] All physical joy. Had a big stride and a bag of seeds and a huge spontaneous affection for the landscape, and everywhere he went he scattered seeds. [...] The Swede had loved that story all his life. (AP, 316)

This “longed-for American pastoral” (AP, 86) is the Swede’s Utopian dream; a dream exemplified in the celebration of Thanksgiving. This “dereligionized” day is the “American Pastoral” par excellence, a “moratorium on all grievances and resentments, and not only for the Dwyers and the Levovs but for everyone in America who is suspicious of everyone else” (AP, 402). Yet this is the pastoral that Merry’s bombing “smashes to smithereens” forcing the Swede to confront the disorder that Roth calls the “counter-pastoral [...] the indigenous American berserk” (AP, 86).

The Swede is a patriot and a nationalist who adores his country precisely because of the life it has enabled him to have. As a result of his unwavering acceptance of American society in terms of its mythic promise of fulfilment and success, he exists in extreme contrast to the protagonist of Roth’s previous novel, *Sabbath’s Theater*. *Sabbath’s Theater* ends with the declaration that “Everything he [Sabbath] hated was here” (ST, 451). In contrast, the Swede’s identity is defined

by the oppositional statement that “Everything he loved was here” (AP, 213). The Swede’s concept of himself is unfailingly linked to the country that has endowed him with success. America, as a brilliant ideal, is thus centrifugal to the Swede’s existence. The Swede’s tragedy rebounds in his unwillingness to accept or acknowledge the possibility of his America being anything other than an idyllic place. Jerry continually confronts him with the possibility of America being an actual “counter-pastoral”:

You have no *idea* what this country is. You have a false image of *everything* [...] You wanted to be a real American jock, a real American marine, a real American hotshot [...] You longed to belong like everybody else to the United States of America? Well, you do now, big boy, thanks to your daughter. The reality of this place is right up in your kisser now. [...] America amok! America amuck! (AP, 277)

Even when his success story is violently interrupted, Zuckerman imagines that the Swede retains his concept of America:

Got to be a United States Marine [...] Got to live in the prettiest spot in the world. Hate America? Why, he lived in America the way he lived inside his own skin. All the pleasures of his younger years had been American pleasures [...] everything that had given meaning to his accomplishments had been American. Everything he loved was here. (AP, 213)

Zuckerman uses Jerry to voice his own initial impressions of the Swede: “You don’t reveal yourself to people Seymour. You keep yourself a secret [...] Why do you do everything? For the appearance!” (AP, 275). As Zuckerman envisions him, the Swede ultimately betrays an unwillingness to break with the self that has, in the past, been so reputable and easily located as “[the] neighborhood talisman, the legendary Swede” (AP, 65). This desire to sustain his narrative leads him to suppress others’ stories. As Jerry tells Zuckerman, the Swede “got caught in a war he didn’t start, and he fought to keep it all together” (AP, 65). The violence that unfolds within the novel counters the Swede’s concept of harmony and challenges his perception of just what exactly it means to be “attuned to the [...] realities of the postwar world” (AP, 311). The Swede’s identity is written in by the codes of his culture but the culture has not equipped him for the demands and specifically the immediacy of history: “People think of history in the long term, but history, in fact, is a very sudden thing” (AP, 87). In frustration the Swede declares, “I didn’t make Vietnam. I didn’t make the television war. I didn’t make Lyndon

Johnson Lyndon Johnson” (AP, 279). The uncontrollability of events around him renders his identity senseless and history prevails without regard for his concept of the world:

Yes, at the age of forty-six, in 1973, almost three-quarters of the way through the century that with no regard for the niceties of burial had strewn the corpses of mutilated children and their mutilated parents everywhere, the Swede found out that we are all in the power of something demented. (AP, 256)

The Swede’s narrative is violently interrupted when, in a protest against the war in Vietnam, his daughter Merry bombs the local post-office. Through this instigating event, instigating in the sense that it forces the Swede to engage existentially with his identity, Roth explores the paring down of identity that occurs when the story, the biography the Swede had imagined for himself, no longer resembles the life he finds himself living. The impact of this event is initially relayed by Jerry at the school reunion:

There was no way back for my brother from that bomb. That bomb detonated his life. His perfect life was over. [...] He was so in love with his own good luck [...] The bomb might as well have gone off in his living room. The violence done to his life was awful. Horrible. Never in his life had occasion to ask himself, ‘Why are things the way they are?’ Why should he bother, when the way they were was always perfect? Why are things the way they are? The question to which there is no answer, and up till then he was so blessed he didn’t even know the question existed. (AP, 69-70)

When the Swede eventually breaks down and declares that “everything is horrible!”, Jerry asserts that now he is finally “developing the beginning of a point of view” (AP, 278). In this moment of despair, the Swede finally acknowledges the chaotic intrusion of the “berserk” (AP, 86) into his life without trying to find a root cause. That Jerry needs to affirm this for the Swede is indicative of the problematic nature of his identity. The Swede considers this stripping down to a “*true self*” as a “wholly deluded fuckup”, a pathetic loss of self (AP, 329). The Swede’s desired life is that symbolised by the “segmented grapefruit” that Mickey Sabbath had found to be so representative of the Cowan’s liberal conventionalism (ST, 246). The unmasking of this “*true self*” is an ailment; it is the affliction of the self, a loss of “health and [...] sanity” (AP, 329). Without the markers of identity, without the defining narrative lines of one’s self, the Swede’s identity is lost:

what was astonishing to him was how people seemed to run out of their own being, run out of whatever the stuff was that made them who they were and, drained of themselves, turn into the sort of people they would once of felt sorry for. [...] And how odd it made him seem to himself to think that he who had always felt blessed to be numbered among the countless unembattled normal ones might, in fact, be the abnormality, a stranger from real life *because* of his being so sturdily rooted. (AP, 329)

iv) “The ugliest daughter ever born of two attractive parents”: Merry (AP, 243)

If narration is the primary means by which the self brings itself into being then Merry’s narrative, and therefore her concept of self, is from the onset, compromised. Merry’s childhood is plagued with attempts to cure her stutter and, in an inverse of what should be a form of written expression, the keeping of a diary, she is made to keep a stuttering diary. In this she records not her daily experiences but a record and analysis of her failure to fully articulate herself. Merry later inverts the significance of her stutter as an impediment and instead uses it as a means by which to attack and rebel against her parents and the social norms she perceives them to epitomize:

Merry concluded that what was deforming her life wasn’t the stutter but the futile effort to overturn it. The crazy effort. The ridiculous significance she had given to that stutter to meet the Rimrock expectations of the very parents and teachers and friends who had caused her to so overestimate something as secondary as the way she talked. Not what she said but how she said it was all that bothered them [...] Yes she cut herself away from caring about the abyss that opened up under everybody’s feet when she started stuttering; her stuttering was no longer going to be the center of her existence. (AP, 101)

Instead, Merry makes the center of her existence a violent protest against the Swede and everything he values: “And the impediment became the machete with which to mow all the bastard liars down” (AP, 100). Within this, America naturally becomes a central target in her tirade against her patriotic, “Johnny Appleseed”, father: “being an American was loathing America [...] There wasn’t much difference, *and she knew it*, between hating America and hating them” (AP, 213).

Merry’s rebellion manifests itself in the physical transformation of her body. “[T]he grasshopper child [...] all at once shot up, broke out, grew stout” (AP, 100) with the result that she becomes “nicknamed by her schoolmates Ho Chi Levov” (AP, 100). This transformation is the first of three transformations Merry

undergoes in the course of the narrative. The initial change is based on increase, a sardonic and symbolic undermining of “her family’s ‘bourgeois’ values” (AP, 101); values she perceives to be epitomized and perpetuated in the Swede and her mother, Dawn. The following excerpt details this initial transformation by listing the grossly hyper-consumerist American “counter-pastoral” into which Merry throws her physical self, as a means of rebelling against the physical perfection embodied in her parents:

[S]he thickened across the back and the neck, stopped brushing her teeth and combing her hair; she ate almost nothing she was served at home but at school and out alone she ate virtually all the time, cheeseburgers with French fries, pizza, BLTs, fried onion rings, vanilla milk shakes, root beer floats, ice cream with fudge sauce, and cake of any kind, so that almost overnight she became large, a large, loping, slovenly sixteen-year-old, nearly six feet tall (AP, 100).

The America presented through Merry’s metamorphosis echoes the consumerist excess listed in the opening passages of Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*:

the junk food still in shopping bags—onion-and-garlic chips, nacho thins, peanut cream patties, Waffelos and Kabooms, fruit chews and toffee popcorn; the Dum-Dum pops, the Mystic mints.¹⁹⁰

Merry literally consumes this “plague America” (AP, 86), instigating in this initial transformation the process of rebellion that would eventually destroy the Levovian genealogy of American dreams and perfection:

And the loss of the daughter, the fourth generation, a daughter [...] who was to have been the perfected image of himself [the Swede] as he had been the perfected image of his father, and his father the perfected image of his father’s father... the angry, rebarbative spitting-out daughter with no interest whatever in being the next successful Levov [...] initiating the Swede into the displacement of another America entirely (AP, 86).

Merry’s second transformation is appropriated through violence in her development into a figure capable of committing an act of terrorism. The gestational period for this transformation is accompanied by her increasingly aggressive political stance (“You f-f-fucking madman!” (AP, 100)), her growing anger in relation to political issues the Swede considers relevant but abstract to

¹⁹⁰ Don De Lillo, *White Noise* (1984; repr., London: Picador, 1985), 3.

their personal lives, and an increased tendency to locate her family and family home as a primary source of her hatred and critique: ““And what are you, Mom? You’re pro c-c-c-cow!”” (AP, 102). In spite of their desire to deflect Merry’s anger away from her family home, Merry’s act of terrorism and her subsequent disappearance leads to the destruction of the Swede’s perfected life “as a successful Levov” (AP, 86). The Swede is convinced that this period is temporary and that Merry’s rebellion will eventually abate, a return to the pastoral of his American fantasies: “Things change. She’ll discover new interests. She’ll have college [...] You can’t expect what you say to have an immediate impact” (AP, 103). In spite of the Levovs’ eagerness to assure her that they as a family agree in theory with her political ideology (“You don’t have to rebel against your family *because your family is not in disagreement with you.*” (AP, 290)), Merry considers the aspirations of her family in relation to their own lives and the expectations they project onto her life, highly objectionable: ““All you can think about, all you can talk about, all you c-c-care about is the well being of this f-fucking l-l-little f-f-family!”” (AP, 107).

Merry’s third and final transformation is her conversion to Jainism, an ancient Indian religion based on a belief of non-violence for all living beings. Merry, however, uses the philosophy of Jainism to engage in a form self-abnegation based on the denial of everything once granted or permitted. Merry’s conversion to Jainism is characterised as a form of self-punishment for the bombing and the subsequent killings that followed. It is an extreme example of self-transformation and is characterised within the terms of “Fantasy and Magic” (AP, 242). As the Swede suggests she is, “[a]lways pretending to be somebody else. What began benignly enough when she was playing at Audrey Hepburn had evolved in only a decade into this outlandish myth of selflessness” (AP, 242). But this too is characterised as an act of “grandiose unreality” (AP, 242). Merry’s final transformation can be interpreted as an attempt to gain autonomy of the self; to remove the self from the narrative of constructed identities by renouncing identity altogether. Her transformation into a Jain can be seen as a drastic attempt to access a truth about identity, as she tells her father: “The truth is simple. Here is the truth. You must be done with craving and selfhood” (AP, 264).

Merry's transformation can also be read as her attempt to completely de-narrativise herself in the hope of reclaiming authority. The disappearance of her stutter is suggestive of a degree of control and the Swede perceives it as such:

Subjecting herself to isolation and squalor and terrible danger, she had attained control, mental and physical over every sound she uttered. An intelligence no longer susceptible to the blight of stuttering. (AP, 246)

She now converses with the full command of speech. While this is so, the question of her having attained autonomy is still problematic because, as the Swede suggests, her attempt is futile in the sense that it merely enslaves her to another ideology. The Swede asks, "Why must she always be enslaving herself to the handiest empty-headed idea? From the moment she had become old enough to think for herself she had been tyrannized instead by the thinking of crackpots" (AP, 241). Merry is convinced that, in this final transformation, she is "done with craving and selfhood" (AP, 251). She "relinquish[es] all influence over everything" (AP, 253), but immediately contradicts this statement in her use of the term "Daddy" to which the Swede replies:

'Do you 'relinquish all influence'?' he cried. 'Do you, 'all influence'?' [...] 'You have influence over *me*,' he shouted, "you are influencing *me*! You who will not kill a mite are killing *me*! [...] your powerlessness is power over me, goddamn it! (AP, 254)

Eakin explores the possibility of cultural models of identity being potentially harmful and sometimes even fatal. In, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, using the story of Chris McCandless who was found dead in the Alaskan wilderness, Eakin examines how Romantic models of identity, particularly those asserted in Thoreau's *Walden*, inspired McCandless to live out this model to its ultimate end. Cutting himself off from family and friends and eventually excommunicating himself from society, Eakin recalls how McCandless embarked on a programme of self-sufficiency, one that he believed guaranteed him his autonomy. However, what it actually guaranteed him was isolation and eventual death. Eakin relates how, along with a photograph of himself McCandless "left two other autobiographical accounts of his last adventure, which record between them a decidedly darker version of romantic individualism than anything to be found in

Walden".¹⁹¹ These "autobiographical accounts" which include "a mini-biography of about a hundred words, scratched in capital letters on a plywood covered window of the bus that became his last refuge" and "a fragmentary journal he kept on two blank pages at the back of a book on edible plants".¹⁹² The entries in this journal are sparse and, eventually, words are replaced by markings, which merely count down the days to his death. These entries Eakin states are "unspeakable: no words, only a circle around the number of each day he survived and a dash."¹⁹³ Yet in the photograph McCandless left he is pictured holding a sheet of paper on which he has written: "I have had a happy life and Thank the Lord. Goodbye and may God Bless All!"¹⁹⁴ This statement purports to testify to the fact that McCandless is dying happy having succeeded in re-establishing his autonomy. If this is in fact the case, it renders critique and condemnation much more difficult. As Eakin states, on one hand McCandless's story can be seen as "edifying and heroic", yet simultaneously it also reads as "a cautionary tale about a victim of fatally misguided beliefs".¹⁹⁵

In *American Pastoral*, Merry's decision to become a Jain draws obvious parallels with the story of Chris McCandless. McCandless de-narrativised himself out of society. Merry similarly de-narrativises herself out of the Swede's story, as he had conceived of it prior to the bombing. When the Swede finally locates Merry and discovers her new identity as a Jain he frustratingly asks her, "Why don't you ask me about your mother?" (AP, 263). Merry's refusal to do so is indicative of the life she has written off. If the autonomous self is mythic and essentially non-existent, then, at best Merry's decision to become a Jain can be seen as an act of narrative control. At least she is actively choosing the script. At worst, it is as Eakin observes of McCandless, "a picture of a radically autonomous identity gone wrong".¹⁹⁶ In *American Pastoral*, Merry's transformation is perceived by the Swede as a "violence" and "thirst for self-transformation" that is "terrifyingly pure" (AP, 254). After the Swede berates Merry for not thinking for herself she attacks him on the same premise, "You're the living example of the person who never thinks for himself!" (AP, 241). While Merry, like Rita Cohen, is prone to

¹⁹¹ Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories*, 45.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁹⁴ Quoted in Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories*, 44.

¹⁹⁵ Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, 45

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

rhetoric and hyperbole, her accusation is pertinent and it resounds throughout the narrative. The Swede is “the most conformist man” within *American Pastoral* (AP, 241).

The Swede’s decision to leave Merry in the squalid room is a decision not to embrace her narrative and to return to his own, however unsustainable it has become. The Swede’s natural impulse is to deny her and to deny the story of her life after the bombing: “You’re not my daughter,” he tells her, “You are not Merry” (AP, 263). In reaction to the news that she has killed four people he declares: “You are an American girl from Old Rimrock, [...] It isn’t you! You could not have done it! (AP, 263-264). His denial comes from the relational aspects of their identity. Merry does not fit the story the Swede had imagined for himself or the narrative of his life that he willingly stepped into. As noted previously, Merry “was to have been the perfected image of himself” (AP, 85-86) but instead has become “[t]he ugliest daughter ever born of two attractive parents” (AP, 243). The Swede cannot align his identity with that of hers or accept the fact that he who “knew violence to be inhuman and futile” (AP, 265) could produce a child who would kill four people. The reality of who she is, however, is contained in her physical identity:

If she was no longer branded as Merry Levov by her stutter, she was marked unmistakably by the eyes. Within the chiselled-out, oversized eye sockets, the eyes were his. The tallness was his and the eyes were his. She was all his. (AP, 266)

This doubling up of identity here forces the Swede into immediate contact with the horror embedded in the reality of his situation. Yet, despite the acknowledgement that she belongs to him, he cannot truly accept her as part of him: “This was his daughter and she was unknowable. This murderer is mine” (AP, 266). No matter how close he comes to fully realising the truth of this he can never get to the core of its meaning: “The veil was off, but behind the veil there was another veil. Isn’t there always?” (AP, 266). The Swede tears the actual veil from Merry’s face, the one she wears to protect her from accidentally ingesting micro-bacteria living in the air; but when he gets the fetid smell of “everything organic breaking down” (AP, 266), he reacts by vomiting on her face and thus creating a crude variation on the veiled self. The emission of bodily secretions here draws parallels with *Sabbath’s Theater*, except in this instance, instead of semen and

urine, it is the unsightly contents of the stomach, the sign of illness and the reversal of the body's natural working order. The Swede literally cannot stomach the life he, as father, has created. David Brauner commenting on the Swede's rejection of his daughter draws an interesting parallel between this scene of rejection and the scene of acceptance in *Patrimony* where Philip cleans up his father's shit, "[y]ou clean up your father's shit because it has to be cleaned up (*PTS*, 175). "If Seymour", Brauner states, "could have sidestepped his disgust and ignored his nausea he might have been able to reclaim some connection with his daughter, to rediscover his paternity in the way Roth rediscovers his patrimony."¹⁹⁷ This scene also stands in noticeable contrast to *Sabbath's Theater* where Sabbath is not repulsed by "human mess" (*AP*, 265). This is made clear in the much tabooed scene where Sabbath urinates on Drenka's face and body (*ST*, 423) and later, where Sabbath tastes the sperm of Drenka's former lover, Lewis, after Lewis masturbates upon a bouquet of flowers he leaves at her graveside: "[he began] licking from his fingers Lewis's sperm, and, beneath the full moon, chanting aloud, 'I am Drenka, I am Drenka!'" (*ST*, 78). In marked contrast to Sabbath's chant of acceptance, the Swede, when finally confronted with his daughter in all her "foulness" (*AP*, 265), screams, "No!" (*AP*, 264) in sheer rejection of the very human being she has become.

v) "the spell of that alluring surface": Dawn (*AP*, 410)

The Swede's relationship with Dawn is also imbued with and fuelled by his fantasy of American life. In the aftermath of the bombing Dawn finds her identity no longer locatable. As with the Swede, her physical appearance inspires in others dreams of an ideal identity, in this case that of the all-American girl. That Dawn does eventually come to be Miss New Jersey and ends up competing in the Miss America beauty pageant testifies to the strength of American ideals to provide identity and direct lives. Dawn's description of her preparation for the pageant is one which hinges heavily on the notion of constructed identities: "they were coaching me on how to sit and how to stand, even how to *listen* – they sent me to a model agency to learn how to *walk*" (*AP*, 180). After the bombing, it is this type of

¹⁹⁷ Brauner, *Philip Roth*, 164.

grooming and performance that Dawn singles out as a point of her anguish. She recalls how she “never wanted *any* of it”, that her one desire had been for normalcy as opposed to the fantasy which the pageant had been. In a passage that once again provides an alternate reading of events for the Swede, Dawn expounds her resentment towards the whole concept of the pageant:

How I wish it had never happened! *None of it!* They put you up on a pedestal, which I didn't ask for, and then they rip you off it so damn fast it can *Blind* you! [...] All I wanted was to be left alone and not to have that goddamn crown sparkling like crazy up on top of my head! I never wanted *any* of it! *Never!* (AP, 180)

Even her choice of husband was dictated by the desire for a normal, American life: “Do you see why I married you? *Now* do you understand? One reason only! I wanted something that seemed normal! [...] I wanted something *normal!*” (AP, 180).

Unlike, the Swede, Dawn regrets ever personally investing in the role of the American beauty. Roth noticeably presents Dawn as a competing narrative to the Swede's version of events. While the Swede is continually mesmerised by the memory of the pageant, Dawn displays a willingness to recognise it as the fantasy production that she now believes it to be. It is essential for the Swede that he retains this part of his version of “their” story. What this also suggests is that the Swede is, like Sabbath, predisposed to shaping and moulding the identities of others to fit the mould of his own identity. Like his desire to fit Merry into a Levovian genealogy of success and perfection, Dawn too is subject to this drive to attain and hold on to his ideals of happiness and perfection. The Swede's professional identity in the glove-making industry means that he deals in production and manufacturing. This stands as an obvious metaphor for the concept of constructing identities. As Marshall Bruce Gentry suggests, the name of the Swede's factory, *Newark Maid*, suggests that the Swede expects the women of his life to be “perfect products of his own manufacturing.”¹⁹⁸

Dawn is a secondary subject in the Swede's journey into America. But, like the Swede, her immediate reaction to Merry's bombing is one of denial. “She's been tricked! She's somewhere right now being brainwashed! [...] No! It isn't

¹⁹⁸ Marshall Bruce Gentry, “Newark Maid: Feminism in Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*”, *Shofar* 19 (Fall 2000), 79.

true!" (AP, 140). However, her disbelief eventually evaporates. Dawn breaks down physically and emotionally, no longer being able to live up to idealistic fictions. Unlike the Swede, she cannot ignore the collapse of their story. Dawn's breakdown can be essentially regarded as a direct acceptance of the rupture that has occurred. It is a realisation that is accompanied by an inability to sustain herself in the midst of their disaster. What this breakdown finally leads to is a transformation of self. Dawn changes her face. She remodels their home, the house that had been the foundation of the Swede's dreams, and begins an affair with Bill Orcutt, the quintessential genteel "Yankee".

However, Roth renders the autonomy and the authenticity of Dawn's transformation ambiguous. Her restoration is still very much indebted to culturally sanctioned fictions. Dawn gets the inspiration for her "new face" from the pages of *Vogue* magazine and employs the Yankee Orcutt as the architect to the new home she is structuring around her reconfigured self. Rothian irony has her refute the beauty pageant only to obtain her new identity from the pages of a beauty magazine. That she does so seems to epitomize a void at the heart of American culture that the text, in many ways, explores. That Dawn seeks her new identity from such a source equates her once again with the Swede and, after her operation she, in fact, becomes more like the Swede because her exterior no longer betrays the self within. The surgery, as the Swede recounts, "erased all [the] suffering" so that Dawn's face was no longer "a record of her misery" (AP, 298). Dawn acquires new ways in which to mask the misery; as selfhood, even in its transformative aspect, is seen to be fragile and over susceptible to culturally approved models of identity.

Even Dawn's affair with Orcutt is telling. When she initially meets him her "Irish resentment" (AP, 301) makes her feel "the class sting" (AP, 310). To Orcutt, Dawn feels as if "she was nothing but laughable lace-curtain Irish, a girl who'd somehow got down the knack of aping her betters so as now to come ludicrously barging into his privileged backyard" (AP, 301). Her rejection of their house is a veiled rejection of the Swede that manifests into her betrayal with Orcutt. This betrayal can be seen to undermine the Swede's fantasy of assimilation. By marrying Dawn, the Swede had attained his dream of the Gentile wife, ignoring the rejection of his Jewish identity implied in his decision. Dawn's betrayal with Orcutt, the ultimate WASP, can similarly be read as her rejection of the Swede's

Jewish identity. It is also a parody of the Swede's attempt to access America through his non-Jewish wife. However, Dawn, Catholic and Irish, was never the quintessential all-American girl to begin with. Her "Irish envy" and her initial dislike and distrust of Orcutt reveals an anxiety about her own claims to an authentic American identity. Her affair with Orcutt can be regarded as her attempt to acquire a portion of America that she, like the Swede (even if he fails to acknowledge it), felt debarred from.

Zuckerman reveals that the Swede's self-preservation extends to the control of the other figures that influence and control his personal life. He suppresses Merry's story after the bombing and refuses to believe in the truth of what she has become. The exposure of Merry's truth is something he fights to keep at bay. Similarly, he chooses to remain ignorant of his wife's affair with Orcutt even though he discovers them together. In the closing sections of the novel when his father, Lou Levov, lets out a scream after he is stabbed with a fork by a drunken neighbour, the Swede immediately imagines that Merry has returned and exposed the reality of who she is to his father: "the ex-terrorist had come [...] and immediately, *immediately* confessed to her father's father what her great idealism had caused her to do" (AP, 421). With this revelation, Swede imagines that his father's heart "gave up, gave out, and he died" (AP, 421). And it is his father's scream that finally tears the veil off the Swede's own life. Despite the fact that it is not Merry's return that has caused his father to shout out, we are still left with the image of Lou Levov, "the giant of the family of six-footers" looking "barely like himself":

His face was vacant of everything except the struggle not to weep he appeared helpless to prevent even that. He could not prevent even that. He could not prevent anything. He never could, only now did he look prepared to believe that manufacturing a superb ladies' dress glove in quarter sizes did not guarantee the making of a life that would fit to perfection everyone he loved. (AP, 421)

vi) "The philosopher-king of ordinary life" (AP, 69)

The novel's three sections "Paradise Remembered," "The Fall," and "Paradise Lost" suggest, in their Miltonian resonance, that the Swede is somewhat responsible for the tragedy that befalls him; the sin being the ease with which he assimilates into life in the "American grain" (AP, 31) and fails to recognise the Jewish aspect of his hyphenated identity. Critics such as Debra Shostak have been quick to point to the Swede's denial of his Jewish identity. Speaking in relation to the Swede's decision to deny cultural differentiation by marrying Dawn, an Irish-American Catholic, Shostak suggests that "Roth shows [...] that the Swede must pay for eating of the fruit in the product of that union, his daughter Merry."¹⁹⁹ Shostak further suggests that, whereas Mordecai Lippman in *The Counterlife* "had wanted to make Jews *visible* as a means to assimilation, the Swede has attempted to make them *invisible* by looking as much unlike themselves as possible".²⁰⁰ Similarly, according to Timothy Parrish, Zuckerman's narrative "locates Swede's fall in the loss of his Jewish identity"²⁰¹ and subsequently, for Parrish, *American Pastoral* "completes the assimilation story [Roth's] fiction has previously been telling by rendering judgement upon its naïve hopefulness".²⁰² Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky reiterates such a view when he suggests that *American Pastoral* is "a cautionary tale of Jewish renunciation"²⁰³ that proves Roth's "loyalty to the Jews—and to his Jewishness—can no longer be doubted."²⁰⁴ But to suggest that Roth renders judgement of any sort or that Roth's oeuvre has been an "assimilation story" is to vastly overstate the matter and undermine the subtlety of Roth's approach and the ambiguity that lies at the center of the novel. In opposition, it can be said that Roth's interest is not in laying blame but in exploring the randomness of tragedy and the imminent explosion of history into an individual life. The Swede is not punished for the sin of what amounts, in the above critical readings, to a reductive and essentialist warning against "tasting the fruit" of Jewish-

¹⁹⁹ Shostak, *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives*, 103.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

²⁰¹ Timothy Parrish, "The End of Identity: Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*", Halio and Siegel eds. (2005), 133.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 133

²⁰³ Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky, "Philip Roth and American Jewish Identity: The Question of Authenticity", *American Literary History* 13.1, (Spring 2001), 96. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3054547>> [accessed August 2009].

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 102.

American assimilation. Rather, as the protagonist of this tragedy, he suffers for his tragic flaw which ultimately can be located in his failure to accept or recognise the irrational, random, and chaotic side of existence. The presentation of the Swede's story throughout *American Pastoral* is centred on the role of chaos and the text itself ends on a question that renders the positioning of blame ambiguous: "And what is wrong with their life? What on earth is less reprehensible than the lives of the Levovs?" (AP, 423).

Critics such as Rubin-Dorsky who have regarded *American Pastoral* as an act of atonement on Roth's part have perhaps mistakenly accepted the opinions of the Swede's brother Jerry for those of Philip Roth. Jerry Levov is one of Roth's brilliant rhetoricians. A heart surgeon who wields words as skilfully as a surgeon's knife, Jerry attempts to lift the skin off the Swede's life in order to expose the unsightly reality that lies within. He directly targets the Swede's "Genteel" (AP, 280) aspirations and his pronouncements on his brother can be aligned with the essentialist readings of Shostak, Rubin-Dorsky, and Parrish: "Out there playing at being Wasps [...] And you thought all that façade was going to come without cost. Genteel and innocent. But that costs, too" (AP, 280). Jerry functions, like the character of Rita Cohen, as a touchstone within a text that, as stated previously, is deceptively filtered through the absent-presence of Zuckerman. At the class reunion, Jerry exposes both the Swede, as the Swede presents himself to Zuckerman in the restaurant, and the Swede of Zuckerman's subsequent imaginings, to a counter-narrative. It is Jerry that shatters Zuckerman's concept of the Swede as thoughtless, vegetable-like figure who in many ways deserves his infamous nickname.

Prior to Jerry's unveiling of the Swede's history, Zuckerman reads the Swede as follows:

I was impressed [...] by how assured he seemed of everything commonplace he said, and how everything he said was suffused by his good nature. I kept waiting for him to lay bare something more than this pointed unobjectionableness, but all that rose to the surface was more surface. What he was instead of a being, I thought, is blandness—the guy's radiant with it. (AP, 23)

Jerry's no nonsense approach to his brother appears initially to align with Zuckerman's impression when he pronounces that "[i]n one way he could be

conceived as completely banal and conventional. [...] Bred to be dumb, built for convention" (*AP*, 65). However, Jerry irrevocably contradicts this reading and Zuckerman's opinion of the Swede when he calls the Swede "a sweetheart whose fate it was to get himself fucked over by some real crazies":

[W]hat he was trying to do was survive, keeping his group intact. He was trying to get through with his platoon intact. It was war for him, finally. [...] He got caught in a war he didn't start, and he fought to keep it all together, and he went down. (*AP*, 65)

It is this moment, and Jerry's subsequent information on "little Merry's darling bomb" (*AP*, 68), that instigates the spark of imagination that leads Zuckerman and the reader into the narrative that constitutes *American Pastoral*. When Jerry reappears later in *American Pastoral*, Zuckerman is actively weaving a narrative in which his presence, as narrator, is no longer acknowledged or visible. It is therefore important to note that the character of Jerry, as he later appears throughout *American Pastoral*, is, like the Swede, a creation of Zuckerman. Jerry retains his powers of rhetorical persuasion and his eagerness to defend his brother. He is a figure whose attachment to the Swede is unquestionable, but who differs drastically to his brother in his reading and opinion on the Swede's chosen life, and his reactions to the tragic events that befall him. Zuckerman employs Jerry as a foil or counter-voice to the Swede and in particular, to the Swede's conventionalism. To read Jerry's pronouncements as the voice of an atoning Roth is to misjudge Jerry's role as a provocateur to what Zuckerman perceives as the Swede's idealism.

Nevertheless, the Swede's idealism in relation to his identity as an assimilated Jewish-American exists at an undeniable extremity that borders on caricature. He wants to embody, as noted previously, the figure of "Johnny Appleseed [...] just a big happy American" (*AP*, 316). The Swede's position as "an ideal person who gets rid of the traditional Jewish habits and attitudes, who frees himself of the pre-American insecurities and the old, constraining obsessions" (*AP*, 85) does indeed present a *potential* avenue for criticism in relation to his apparent abandonment of ethnic identity. Shostak is right to note this when she says that his "dream of nondifferentiation" displays an ignorance of "cultural differences."²⁰⁵

²⁰⁵ Shostak, *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives*, 103.

However, the portrayal of the Swede as such a relentlessly devout and idealised American cannot be posited as a punishable transgression of his hyphenated existence. Merry's bomb bears no relation to whether or not the Swede has undergone an ethnic transgression. Her action is equated with chaos and precisely because it is *chaos* it cannot be equated with the logic executed by Roth's critics in relation to the Swede's "wish to live unapologetically as an equal among equals" (*AP*, 85). While this wish may be a delusionary ideal, the text is ambivalent about rendering judgement on such "Swedian innocence" (*AP*, 4). "Nobody" is "set up for tragedy" (*AP*, 86), Zuckerman asserts, and the novel, ending as it does on a question, "What on earth is less reprehensible than the life of the Levovs?" (*AP*, 423), reiterates Zuckerman's claim that the tragedy of the unforeseen "is every man's tragedy" (*AP*, 86).

Chapter Four

“Every soul its own betrayal factory”: *I Married a Communist* and *The Human Stain*

I. *I Married a Communist*

i) “The master of life exulting in his own existence”²⁰⁶

Ira Ringold is a “redeemed roughneck from Newark’s First Ward” (*IMAC*, 23) who becomes a radio celebrity and a renowned Abraham Lincoln impersonator. He is also a committed Communist who hides his politics behind his bourgeois lifestyle. Married to Eve Frame, a famous radio actress and star of the silent screen, he not only masks his political affiliations but also a violent past in which he brutally murdered a fellow ditch digger who had made him the target of anti-Semitic remarks. When Eve and Ira’s marriage dissolves, aided by Ira’s antagonistic relationship with Eve’s daughter Sylphid and Ira’s mounting infidelities, Eve publishes, in an act of revenge and betrayal, a memoir of the marriage. The memoir is called “I Married a Communist” and in it she not only exposes Ira as a Communist but accuses him of espionage. While Ira is not officially charged, he is blacklisted and his public persona is ruined. In an interview on the novel Roth describes how Ira “is momentarily destroyed because he’s suicidal, [...] but then he’s more deeply brought down because the rage, the unsublimated rage is aroused in him and he decides he is going to kill Eve Frame.”²⁰⁷ While this does not actually take place, nonetheless, Roth explains, “Ira the wild man takes over. The wild man he had been trying to suppress for all these many decades.”²⁰⁸ His various attempts at self-transformation are thus unsuccessful. They fail to enable him to transcend the intrusion of the historical moment into his personal life and the private betrayal that accompanies it. After Eve’s embellished disclosures he is

²⁰⁶ Roth, *I Married a Communist* (London: Vintage, 1998), 58.

²⁰⁷ Roth, “*I Married a Communist* Interview”, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

<<http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/authors/roth/conversation.shtml>> [accessed July 2009].

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

returned to the life of misery and poverty he had tried through self-reinvention to permanently escape.

In the novel the story of Ira's tragedy is told to Zuckerman by Ira's brother Murray. "My last task" Murray states, is "[t]o file Ira's story with Nathan Zuckerman" (*IMAC*, 265). Zuckerman narrates the story of the story, and reports the details of Ira's life as relayed to him by Murray. In this, *I Married a Communist* differs significantly from the other two novels of the trilogy, as the element of imaginative speculation is missing. Whereas Zuckerman, in *American Pastoral* and *The Human Stain*, is forced to fill in the epistemological gaps with narrative reinvention, Murray, in *I Married a Communist*, is presented as a primary source of knowledge, a source that goes unchallenged throughout the narrative. This is further enhanced by the fact that Zuckerman had been closely acquainted with Ira throughout much of the proceedings subsequently related to Zuckerman by Murray. Commenting on the narrative strategy Roth states that Zuckerman and Murray working "in tandem [...] more or less tell Ira's story whole."²⁰⁹ The reader is therefore the recipient of not only one "valid" version of Ira's story, but a second account from Zuckerman and together they interlink to provide a story that has veracity within the textual world of *I Married a Communist*. This narrative strategy irritated some reviewers, Michiko Kakutani calls it "willfully oblique" and suggests that the "reader begins to feel that Nathan and Murray are simply talking around and about Ira, telling us what to think of him, without allowing us a glimpse of him firsthand."²¹⁰ Talking and telling, and in addition listening, however, are crucial motifs in the novel. As Roth states, it is a book in which "[e]verybody is educating everybody else."²¹¹ The narrative framing is a further example of this. As Zuckerman listens to Murray's "strong narrative spell" (*IMAC*, 1) what emerges is a mutual "dramatizing inquiry" (*IMAC*, 1) about a man "perpetually hungering after his life" (*IMAC*, 319). If, as a result of this inquiry, Ira "remains annoyingly opaque"²¹² as Kakutani also states, it is precisely because Ira,

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Michiko Kakutani, "Manly Giant vs. Zealots And Scheming Women", Books of The Times: Review of *I Married a Communist* by Philip Roth. *The New York Times*, 6 October 1998.

<<http://www.nytimes.com/1998/10/06/books/books-of-the-times-manly-giant-vs-zealots-and-scheming-women.html?n=Top%2fFeatures%2fBooks%2fBook%20Reviews>> [accessed July 2009].

²¹¹ Roth, "I Married a Communist", interview by Houghton Mifflin,

<http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/authors/roth/conversation.shtml> [accessed July 2009]

²¹² Kakutani, "Books of The Times; Manly Giant vs. Zealots And Scheming Women", *The New York Times*.

in the narrative recalled, remains opaque to himself. As Murray suggests, Ira's "passion was to be someone he didn't know how to be [...] he never discovered his life" (*IMAC*, 319).

Roth has called Swede Levov "history's plaything" (*AP*, 87) and this description can equally be applied to Ira Ringold. Trying to "imagine Ira *outside* of his moment was impossible" (*IMAC*, 189). While the Vietnam War, and Merry's violent protest against it, destroys the self-gestated narrative of the Swede's life, in *I Married a Communist* it is the red-baiting of the McCarthy era that strips Ira of his self-transformations and his attempts to script and control his reality. As Zuckerman states:

I had never before known anyone whose life was so intimately circumscribed by so much American history, who was personally familiar with so much American geography, who had confronted, face to face, so much American lowlife. I'd never known anyone so immersed in his moment or so defined by it. Or tyrannized by it, so much its avenger and its victim and its tool. (*IMAC*, 189)

Ira, like the protagonists who precede him, is driven by a conscious engagement with his country. In particular, Ira is driven by the desire to instigate a change in the socio-political injustice he perceives to be embedded in American social and political life: "He must change everything. For him that was the purpose of being in the world. Everything he wanted to change was here" (*IMAC*, 84). This statement directly echoes the Swede's claim that "Everything he loved was here" (*AP*, 213) and Sabbath's antithesis that "Everything he hated was here" (*ST*, 451). This desire for change is also applicable to Ira's self-identity as once again the overriding impulse of Roth's protagonist is for self-transformation. The "trinity of Iras, all three of him" (*IMAC*, 23) is the phrase used by Zuckerman to capture Ira's transformative self. Ira exists simultaneously as "the patriot martyr of the podium Abraham Lincoln, the natural, hardy American of the airwaves Iron Rinn, and the redeemed roughneck from Newark's First Ward Ira Ringold" (*IMAC*, 23).

Each of these selves is associated with conventional or approved American identities; the "hardy American", the "redeemed roughneck", the "patriot martyr". Like Zuckerman's description of the Swede, they are "*right in the American grain.*" (*AP*, 31) However, while these transformations are very much in the "*American grain*" they also work to conceal the identity of the individual to whom

they are attributed and can consequently be seen as an attempt at concealment. Ira, in transforming himself into a trinity of American models of identity, is concealing an aspect of himself he wishes to remain undiscovered. Ira's murder is an aspect of his identity that he wishes to conceal just as Coleman's ethnicity in *The Human Stain* is an aspect of his identity he too wishes to conceal. Roth shows how America encourages such transformation, and by implication, concealment:

You're an American who doesn't want to be your parents' child? Fine. You don't want to be associated with Jews? Fine. You don't want anybody to know you were born Jewish, you want to disguise your passage into the world? You want to drop the problem and pretend you're somebody else? Fine. You've come to the right country. (*IMAC*, 157)

As Murray ascertains, "Ira was an easy mark for the utopian vision" (*IMAC*, 217). In stark contrast to the Swede, who expects the idyllic because he has known nothing else, Ira's underprivileged past and his violent crime make him ripe for self-transformation. Murray, speaking of this transformation states:

He had pulled off a great big act of control over the story that was his life. He is all at once awash in the narcissistic illusion that he has been sprung from the realities of pain and loss that his life is *not* futility—that it's anything *but* [...] Out of the grips of obscurity. And proud of his transformation. The exhilaration of it. The naïve dream—he's in it! (*IMAC*, 60)

I Married a Communist predominantly conveys the extent of Ira's naivety. The Swede's dream was one of homogeneity, enthralling himself to his idea of a quintessential, idealised American identity represented by such non-political figures as "Johnny Appleseed." In contrast, Ira's utopia lies in his political idealism; but his idealism is out of place in an America that posits his politics as criminal. While, as I have argued in Chapter Three, the Swede's pastoral was destroyed by the sudden and unforeseen imposition of chaos, it is Ira's naivety to the political reality of the McCarthy era and his own hypocrisy that causes his downfall. As Derek Parker Royal notes Ira's "tirades against capitalism and his arguments for a working class utopia become another version of Roth's unattainable pastorals, a realm free from the complexities of daily living."²¹³ Ira's idea of the pastoral is one that values and exonerates the working class and his

²¹³ Derek Parker Royal, "Pastoral Dreams and National Identity in American Pastoral and *I Married a Communist*", Royal ed., *New Perspectives* (2005), 191.

dream for America is one of a socially just utopia. It is, as David Brauner notes, also a utopia of purity. Ira's "Utopian fantasy" Brauner states, is a "dream of political purification through Communism."²¹⁴ In contrast to the Swede's "Johnny Appleseed," Ira's models of identity are prominent figures in American political history. He proselytises on the writings of Thomas Paine and impersonates the towering figure of Abraham Lincoln; an impersonation he was, according to Murray, pre-designed for on account of his physical appearance: "If it weren't for that resemblance none of this would have happened to him, if only he hadn't been responsible to his looks" (*IMAC*, 283). Yet Ira's "utopian vision" (*IMAC*, 217) is particularly flawed because as Debra Shostak notes he "seeks a purity, an unfallen condition, that in a sense he never had."²¹⁵ In this sense, Ira's self-transformation, unlike the self-transformations of the Swede and Coleman Silk, can be regarded as transgressive because as well as being morally repugnant, the murder he commits, like his political beliefs, is punishable by law. It grossly undermines his dream of a utopia based on social justice.

While for a brief period Ira succeeds in masking the past and appears to be the "master of life exulting in his own existence" (*IMAC*, 58) the naivety of his dream quickly becomes apparent as Murray tells Zuckerman the story of how "[t]he whole thing failed.' The life shaped to overcome it had all fallen apart" (*IMAC*, 297). This "it" is Ira's violent and murderous past. The utopia Ira seeks is not only in conflict with this hidden past, it directly conflicts with how he lives in the present. The life of privilege he leads with Eve Frame contradicts the politics of his Communist ideology. When Ira is exposed by Eve's memoir, it is precisely Ira's penchant for impersonation that his mentor, Johnny O'Day attacks as hypocritical. After Eve's memoir is published O'Day abandons Ira, denouncing the way he lives his life:

Always impersonating and never the real thing [...] He wasn't a man—he impersonates being a man along with everything else. Impersonates being a *great* man. The guy impersonates everything. He throws off one disguise and becomes something else. (*IMAC*, 288)

In marked contrast O'Day encapsulates the singularity of the zealot:

²¹⁴ Brauner, *Philip Roth*, 152.

²¹⁵ Shostak, *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives*, 252.

Zealotry had bestowed the look of a body that had a man locked up inside serving the severe sentence that was his life. It was the look of a being who has no choice. His story has been made up beforehand. (*IMAC*, 228)

Ira, in opposition, chooses to make up his own story, drawing on the pre-established ideals of patriotism and Communism as he sees fit. Yet, as Murray reminds him, self-transformation can only go so far in eradicating the past: “You will never get rid of this secret. You will go to the cemetery with this secret. You will have it with you forever!” (*IMAC*, 300) Thinking about Ira’s crime, Murray wonders, “How can you commit an act of murder and not be anguished by it?” (*IMAC*, 300) Comparing Ira’s crime to that of the protagonist in Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, Murray thinks “A cold-blooded killer with a mind like Raskolnikov’s reflects all his life on his cold-bloodedness. But Ira was not very self-reflective, ever. Ira is an action machine” (*IMAC*, 300).

This description links him to the Swede where Jerry suggests that he was “Bred to be dumb, built for convention” (*AP*, 65). Ira’s impersonations leave him similarly vacuous whereas the Swede, a “nice, simple, stoical guy” (*AP*, 65), has been “built for [the] convention” he craves. Ira is left with nothing because of his underlying hypocrisy. His self-transformations undermine the desire for individuality and self-autonomy that is implied in the concept of self-invention. In contrast, these inventions are essentially shown to be the essence of someone else’s idea:

It was for his union’s Washington-Lincoln birthday fund-raiser [...] that *somebody got the idea* to turn Ira, a wiry man, knobbily jointed, with dark, coarse Indian-like hair and a floppy, big-footed gait, into Abe Lincoln: *put* whiskers on him, *decked him out* in a stovepipe hat, high button shoes, and an old fashioned, ill-fitting black suit, and *sent him up* to the lectern to read from the Lincoln-Douglas debates. (*IMAC*, 43, emphasis added)

Ira is the passive recipient of the transformation. In this sense Ira also epitomizes the concept of the “walking text” that this thesis is forwarding as a key concept in Roth’s representation of selfhood. Ira is an amalgamation of ideologies, a crude vessel of learning and an indoctrinated mouthpiece, ventriloquizing the polemical books he has “devour[ed]” (*IMAC*, 48). Likewise, the transformation into the radio star is someone else’s doing, as Arthur Sokolow brings him from general obscurity into a leading role in radio.

Surface, appearance, and hiddenness, preoccupy Zuckerman's imagination in the trilogy. These acts of transformation and impersonation are shown to be the means by which these characters sustain themselves. Eve Frame partakes of a similar transformation to Ira's through her rebuttal of the past. "To live without remembering" (*IMAC*, 255) is Eve's "means of survival" (*IMAC*, 255). What Eve chooses to forget is her underprivileged Jewish background. Born Chava Fromkin, the daughter of "poor immigrant [...] uneducated Polish Jew[s]" (*IMAC*, 306-307), she transforms herself into the Gentile actress Eve Frame. Eve chooses to discard her original name because she wishes to pass as Gentile. Roth cleverly illustrates the double concealment in this act of re-naming by embedding a clue to her Jewish origins within the name she discards in her transformation into Eve Frame. Chava Fromkin (*from kin*) is of Jewish ethnicity and the name she keeps hidden is a perpetual reminder of the kin she is also seeking to conceal. Her adopted name, Eve Frame, is an apt choice as it draws attention to the fact that Eve's anti-Semitism is coming from a deeply-rooted shame in relation to her Jewish origins. Eve discards Chava Fromkin because she is ashamed of her Jewish background. The novel explicitly conveys that the impetus for this transformation came from her shame in relation to her Jewish identity. This shame takes the form of self-hatred and in the course of the narrative she betrays this self-loathing when she calls Doris Ringold, Murray's wife, a "hideous, twisted little Jew!" (*IMAC*, 253) It is suggested that this transformation, however, not only erases her past and her Jewish background but results in a complete evisceration of self:

Underneath the smile there was nothing at all, not her character, not her history, not even her misery. She was just what was stretched across her face. She wasn't even alone. There was no one to *be* alone. Whatever shaming origins she had spent her life escaping had resulted in this: someone from whom life itself had escaped.²¹⁶ (*IMAC*, 253)

²¹⁶ The critical reception of *I Married a Communist* was somewhat marred by a tendency to read the character of Eve as a vicious portrait of Claire Bloom, Roth's ex-wife and the novel as Roth's revenge on Bloom for her highly unpleasant portrayal of Roth in her memoir, *Leaving A Doll's House*. A clear example of this is Linda Grant's pronouncement on the novel. Reviewing *I Married a Communist* Grant states: "In *I Married a Communist*, it is the facts of Roth's 20-year relationship with Claire Bloom that are turned into a novel of revenge [...] here the whole enterprise of examining the McCarthy period collapses under the weight of Roth's vengeful agenda." Linda Grant, "The Wrath of Roth", review of *I Married a Communist* by Philip Roth, *The Guardian*, 3 October 1998. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/1998/oct/03/fiction.philiproth>> [accessed July 2009]. See also Kakutani "Manly Giant vs. Zealots and Scheming Women", *The New York Times*. These readings of the text once again display a critical tendency to read Roth's protagonists as veiled versions of Philip Roth rather than imaginative inventions.

Eve's memoir ironically demonstrates this vacuous existence because it is actually written by Katrina and Bryden Grant as a means of self-promotion. "The Grants," states Murray, "dreamed it all up for Bryden to ride his way into the House on the issue of Communism in broadcasting" (*IMAC*, 273). Eve, he concludes had "systematically [...] made herself the slave of just about everyone" (*IMAC*, 273).

ii) "Every soul its own betrayal factory" (*IMAC*, 262)

In the novel private selves become public property as domestic drama becomes front page news and a cause for national concern. As Murray tells Zuckerman: "I think of the McCarthy era as inaugurating the postwar triumph of gossip as the unifying credo of the world's oldest democratic republic. In Gossip We Trust" (*IMAC*, 284). Murray conveys the sense of the show-trial that permeated the McCarthy era: "He took us back to our origins, back to the seventeenth century and the stocks. That's how the country began: moral disgrace as public entertainment" (*IMAC*, 284). The novel explores the nature of this public denouncing and considers how it shifted the meaning of betrayal by nationally sanctioning acts of disloyalty. The Red Scare made everyone a potential suspect and, by proxy, a potential informer. The fact that Ira is eventually exposed by his wife, that this exposure comes not from without but from within, demonstrates the extent to which this public anxiety infiltrated the privacy of domestic life. Considering the prevalence of betrayal during this period, Murray asks "when before had betrayal ever been so destigmatized? It was everywhere in those years, the accessible transgression, the permissible transgression that any American could commit" (*IMAC*, 264). This sanctioning of betrayal enabled people to "transgress without giving up [their] moral authority" (*IMAC*, 264). It enabled them to "retain [their] purity" (*IMAC*, 264) as the betrayal was seen as a patriotic act. Eve's betrayal of Ira, Murray suggests, fell precisely "within the routine informer practices of the era" (*IMAC*, 264). Within this atmosphere of betrayal concepts of truth get thwarted as "translating the truth into a lie. Translating one lie into another lie" becomes the defining "*skill*" (*IMAC*, 265) of the period.

It is significant that Eve's betrayal takes the form of writing; the form of memoir and autobiography. As discussed in Chapter One, in *Patrimony* Roth posits

writing as a potential act of betrayal when writing about his father. Eve's exposé seems to confirm Roth's comments on the "unseemliness of [his] profession" (*PTS*, 237). By choosing to locate the betrayal in writing, Roth automatically includes Zuckerman in this act of betrayal because he, as the "narrator-author" of *I Married a Communist*, is the figure directly responsible for the exposure of these concealed stories. Commenting on the double employment of "I Married a Communist" as the title of Eve's memoir and the title of the narrative Zuckerman narrates, Shostak observes: "when we read the title of the novel and then open the book to hear Nathan's voice, the vengeful 'I' is also Nathan, who has, in a sense, wed the mythic Ira, felt betrayed by Ira's ideological seductions, and then retaliated by telling his secrets."²¹⁷ Shostak is perhaps taking the analogy too far because at no point in the trilogy does Zuckerman display a "vengeful" voice in relation to Ira, or indeed any of his key protagonists. Nonetheless Shostak's observation does reflect Roth's pointed analogy between writing and the act of betrayal within the text. Writing is posited as an act of informing because the trajectory of the narrative is towards revelation. As will be discussed below in relation to *The Human Stain*, Zuckerman's book of the same name reveals Coleman Silk's racial identity and Les Farley as his murderer. While it is not explicitly stated in *I Married a Communist* that Zuckerman's book carries the same name, the reader can infer as much by the fact that Zuckerman narrates the book from beginning to end.

Within the text Murray's narration, and the information he provides, can similarly be seen as betrayal because he not only relates Ira's story but also reveals Ira's crime to Zuckerman; something that Eve Frame managed to keep hidden, despite her knowledge of the crime. Murray's comment that he wants to "file" Ira's story with Zuckerman suggests a level of officialdom that went hand in hand with the acts of public and private betrayal carried out during the McCarthy era wherein the idea of the government having a "file" on an individual was a prevalent anxiety. Murray's retelling of the events exorcises his own guilt in relation to Ira's crime. He understands that by keeping quiet about the murder, "I sat on it" (*IMAC*, 301), he had relinquished his "obligation to humanity" (*IMAC*, 301). Zuckerman's narrative therefore enacts a double exposure as it confirms Murray as a silent

²¹⁷ Shostak, *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives*, 257.

accomplice to Ira's crime. That both Ira and Murray are dead before Zuckerman writes their story lessens the accusation of betrayal. Nonetheless, anxiety about the morally precarious nature of the novelist has been stated and confirmed by the double use of the title "I Married a Communist." Roth's book and Zuckerman's narrative share the title of Eve's salacious memoir and are thus self-consciously implicating themselves as similar acts of betrayal through narrative.

iii) "the book of my life is a book of voices" (*IMAC*, 222)

To counteract this anxiety Roth has Zuckerman reassess his purpose as a writer. From his position as auditor he states: "Why do they want me to hear them and their arias? Where was it decided that this was my use?" (*IMAC*, 222) Emphasis is not based merely on the writer writing but on the writer listening. Conceiving of the writer as such makes Zuckerman assert:

I think of my life as one long speech that I've been listening to. The rhetoric is sometimes original, sometimes pleasurable, sometimes pasteboard crap (the speech of the incognito), sometimes maniacal, sometimes matter-of-fact, and sometimes like the sharp prick of a needle, and I have been hearing it for as long as I can remember. [...] what is shallow, what is shit, and how to remain pure in soul. Talking to me doesn't seem to present an obstacle to anyone. [...] But whatever the reason the book of my life is a book of voices. When I ask myself how I arrived at where I am, the answer surprises me: 'Listening.' (*IMAC*, 222)

Zuckerman's attentiveness to Murray's narrative is connected with a need to situate himself within the narrative of American history and to reconnect with his own past. The willingness to still listen is indicative of Zuckerman's continual enthrallment with these figures of his youth. As Murray wonders why Zuckerman secludes himself, Zuckerman gives a cogent insight when he tells Murray: "You have a choice up on this mountain: either you can lose contact with history, as I sometimes choose to do, or mentally you can do what you're doing [...] work to reclaim possession of it" (*IMAC*, 262).

Reclaiming possession of history, especially in light of the onset of death, is a vital component of the trilogy. The Swede, Ira and Coleman all die prematurely and as death prevails in each of their life stories, Zuckerman's urge to narrate is intensified and imbued with a seriousness that is directly linked to the

untold stories that would otherwise, quite literally, have been taken to the grave. When Murray finishes his story Zuckerman considers the possibility that Murray may, in fact, be dead:

When I looked over and I saw his head was back and his eyes were shut. First I thought he was asleep, and then I wondered if he was dead, if, after having remembered the whole of Ira's story—the will to go on had lost its grip even on the most enduring of men. (*IMAC*, 313)

Zuckerman relates stories of defeated and vanquished selves and in narrating against these lacunae he aims to uncover and to recover something of their true identity. In the process he also discovers something about his own past, however much he strives to keep his own story at a remove. Ira's story is also Zuckerman's story, despite his declaration that he “doesn't want a story any longer” (*IMAC*, 71).

To a certain extent this is true of the trilogy as a whole but nowhere is it more pointedly the case than in *I Married a Communist*. At certain points in the text Zuckerman interrupts Murray's narrative to give an account of his own engagement with Ira and his experience as a boy during that particular period in history. What these interjections amount to is a coming of age story in which Zuckerman first discovers that he wants to be a writer. At seventeen he begins writing radio plays written in the style of Norman Corwin and inspired from his conversations with Ira. These plays were about “the lot of the common man” (*IMAC*, 38) and often replicated the letters written to Ira by O'Day, which Ira in turn read aloud to Zuckerman (*IMAC*, 37). For Zuckerman, Corwin's plays were reflective of the atmosphere of the period, of the feeling of being immersed in history and the nationalistic fervour that swept the country; something which fully ignited Zuckerman's imagination and fuelled his initial desire to write:

History had been scaled down and personalized. For me, that was the enchantment not only of Norman Corwin but of the times. You flood into history and history floods into you. You flood into America and America floods into you. [...] Back when popular culture was sufficiently connected to the last century to be susceptible to a little language, there was a swooning side to all of it for me. (*IMAC*, 39)

The history that had been personalised was that of World War II, which Zuckerman describes as “the revolution that confirmed the reality of the myth of a national character, to be partaken by all. Including me” (*IMAC*, 38-39). While

Zuckerman would later distinguish between ideology and art, these plays, Zuckerman notes, gave him his “first sense of the conjuring *power* of art” and helped strengthen “[his] first ideas as to what [he] wanted and expected a literary artist’s language to do: enshrine the struggles of the embattled” (*IMAC*, 38).

Zuckerman describes how the tenacious courage he found in Corwin extended itself to the family dinner table where each night Zuckerman went head to head with his father over political disagreements. “At the mere sound of the first syllable of the word ‘compromise’ I jumped up from my chair and told him [...] that I could never again eat at that table if my father was present” (*IMAC*, 31). These conversations culminate in Zuckerman shouting “red-baiter” (*IMAC*, 33) at his father and storming off to a political rally. The appeal of the rally is also the appeal of the surrogate father that Zuckerman locates in Ira, and the betrayal is an ironic mirroring of the larger political and private betrayals that the text discloses: “little Tom Paine has no choice but to [...] betray the father and go boldly forth to step straight into life’s very first pit” (*IMAC*, 32). Furthermore, when Zuckerman chooses Ira over his father and realises his father’s recognition of this, the outcome is pointedly stated:

I saw in my father’s face a look of resigned disappointment, [...] something midway between melancholy and futility. It was a look that would never be entirely forgotten by me when I was alone with Ira, or, later, with Leo Glucksman, Johnny O’Day. [...] His face with that look on it was always looming up, superimposed on the face of the man who was then educating me in life’s possibilities. His face bearing the wound of betrayal. (*IMAC*, 106)

Zuckerman “discovered the sense of betrayal that comes of trying to find a surrogate father even though you love your own” (*IMAC*, 106).

Contemplating this idea of surrogates Zuckerman thinks: “How are they chosen? Through a series of accidents and through lots of will. How do they get to you, and how do you get to them? Who are they? What is it, this genealogy that isn’t genetic?” (*IMAC*, 217) He then goes on to state that in his case, “they were men to whom I apprenticed myself, from Paine and Fast and Corwin to Murray and Ira and beyond—the men who schooled me, the men I came from” (*IMAC*, 217). Yet for Zuckerman, the other significance of these adoptive parents is that they too must be cast off: “along with their legacy, [they] had to disappear, thus making way for the orphanhood that is total, which is manhood” (*IMAC*, 217). Thus for

Zuckerman, Ira is eventually cast off, as is O'Day, and Leo Glucksman. This casting off is what fundamentally differentiates Ira and Zuckerman. While Zuckerman discards his adoptive parents Ira clings to his, never truly finding out what it is like to be "out there in this thing all alone" (*IMAC*, 217). While that is how Ira eventually ends up, it is not through a willing endeavour but yet again through abandonment, as O'Day rejects and disowns him. For Zuckerman the letting go is essential for the leap into manhood. Zuckerman traces Ira's inability to let go back to his childhood in which he loses his parents at an early age. Zuckerman draws a comparison between him and Ira when he states: "But for me, who was moored, it was different" (*IMAC*, 217). This difference is what enables Zuckerman to see beyond a figure such as O'Day, even though he momentarily becomes enthralled with him.

iv) "Beware the utopia of isolation" (*IMAC*, 315)

The lasting image that connects Zuckerman to Ira is the image of the shack. Considering this Zuckerman asks, "How did this idea of Ira's shack maintain its hold so long?" (*IMAC*, 72) And considering his own home he thinks, "I wondered if Murray had as yet recognised my house as an upgraded replica of the two-room shack on the Jersey side of the Delaware Water Gap that was Ira's beloved retreat" (*IMAC*, 71). Though Zuckerman's house doesn't have "that dark, drooping ramshackle look that proclaimed, 'Hermit here—back off,' the owner's state of mind," Zuckerman asserts "was discernable in the absence of anything like a path across the hay field that led to the bolted front door" (*IMAC*, 71). The idea of the shack and the bolted door, however, as Zuckerman notes, has a legacy beyond Ira's passing influence on the young Zuckerman's concept of "rural America" (*IMAC*, 71):

And the idea of the shack, after all, isn't Ira's. It has a history. It was Rousseau's. It was Thoreau's. The palliative of the primitive hut. The place where you are stripped back to essentials, to which you return—even if it happens not to be where you came from—to decontaminate and absolve yourself of the striving. (*IMAC*, 72)

When Zuckerman meets O'Day he realises that "his room, his cell, was the spiritual

essence of Ira's shack" (*IMAC*, 228):

Now I understood what Ira was doing in the shack. Now I understood the seed of the shack and the stripping back of everything—the aesthetic of the ugly [...] that left a man lonely and monastic but also encumbered, free to be bold and unflinching and purposeful. What O'Day's room represented was discipline, that discipline which says that however many desires I have, I can circumscribe myself down to this room. (*IMAC*, 227-228)

This description of the "stripping back of everything" and the paring down of identity recalls Merry's radical "circumscribing" of her corporeal self in *American Pastoral*. Like O'Day the narrative to which Merry has ascribed her self-identity, her disciplined adherence to Jainism, has granted her a corresponding freedom that is illustrated in the disappearance of her stutter and her relinquishing of the "craving[s]" (*AP*, 264) brought about by an uncircumscribed subjectivity.

In *I Married a Communist* Zuckerman traces the essence of the shack back to its earlier origins when he states, "And what was the spiritual essence of O'Day's room? I'd find out some years later when I'd located the house with the commemorative tablet bearing Lenin's name" (*IMAC*, 228). Commenting on this passage Ross Posnock notes the ironic connection between Zuckerman's pursuit of the aesthetic and the ardent ideology of Communism when he observes how Leo Glucksman "has qualities that Nathan associates with Ira and the dogmatic Johnny O'Day."²¹⁸ Leo also inhabits an isolated space, one of bookish discipline, and he initiates the young Zuckerman into this world. Leo's commitment to de-conventionalising Zuckerman's thinking is as zealous as O'Day's instinct to recruit him: "to Johnny O'Day I wasn't anybody's son he had to protect. To him I was a body to be recruited" (*IMAC*, 233). "Every Friday night," Zuckerman recalls, "the spell was cast [...] Leo went at me on those Friday nights as though I were the last student left on earth" (*IMAC*, 222). What connects O'Day and Glucksman is their "uncompromising" point of view, which, according to Zuckerman, was "Tom Paine's irresistible attribute, Ira's, Leo's, and Johnny O'Day's" (*IMAC*, 224). O'Day's "cell" is also the writer's room, a place of isolation, which, as Posnock notes, makes explicit the "connection between loneliness and art marking".²¹⁹

²¹⁸ Posnock, *Philip Roth's Rude Truth*, 52.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

This is what Zuckerman dedicates his life to, as fervently as Ira embraced the Communist ideologies upheld by O'Day. When Murray questions him about his "aloneness" (*IMAC*, 320), Zuckerman states: "Now I laughed at *him*, a laugh that allowed me to feel substantial again, charged up with my independence of everything, a recluse to be conjured with" (*IMAC*, 320). He then tells Murray "I listened carefully to your story, that's what happened" (*IMAC*, 320). Here the concept of the writer as a receiver of stories is reiterated and Zuckerman's statement also suggests that Murray's narrative holds a warning—the entanglement and engagement with others is to leave the self susceptible and open to betrayal. In contrast, the primitive hut also offers a reprieve from such vulnerability to betrayal by others as well as a place where one can recede "from the agitation of the autobiographical" (*IMAC*, 72). When Murray's narrative is finished Zuckerman ends his night thinking:

Ira was dead, that Eve was dead, that with the exception perhaps of Sylphid [...] all the people with a role in Murray's account of the Iron Man's unmaking were now no longer impaled on their moment but dead and free of the traps set for them by their era. (*IMAC*, 322)

When Murray leaves "him for good" (*IMAC*, 323) Zuckerman looks to the constellations in search of permanency, and thinks: "What you see from this silent rostrum up on my mountain [...] is that universe into which error does not obtrude. You see the inconceivable, the colossal spectacle of no antagonism" (*IMAC*, 323). Here history doesn't exist, the autobiographical doesn't exist. Zuckerman, in words that pre-empt his state of mind in *Exit Ghost*, describes how his interest in the constellations has replaced his interest in what goes on in the world:

I'd tear out the small double-columned box called 'Sky Watch' [...] and chuck out the four pounds of everything else [...] soon I had chucked everything with which I no longer wish to contend, everything but what was needed to live on and work with. (*IMAC*, 321)

This is Zuckerman's utopia and one that Murray, before parting, warns him against when he tells him, "Beware the utopia of isolation. Beware the utopia of the shack in the woods, the oasis defence against rage and grief. An impregnable solitude. That's how life ended for Ira, and long before the day he dropped dead" (*IMAC*, 315).

At the close of the novel Zuckerman fixes his sight to the constellations:

There are no longer mistakes for Eve or Ira to make. There is no betrayal. There is no idealism. There are no falsehoods. There is neither conscience nor its absence. There are no mothers and daughters, no fathers and stepfathers. There are no actors. There is no class struggle [...] There are no utopias. (IMAC, 322)

Yet there are still the stars, the burning furnaces that testify to the existence of those who are no longer living. This ode to permanency that closes *I Married a Communist* stands as one of Roth's most poignant pieces of writing. Yet in its eradication of everything earthly it ironically instils its own vision of utopia where these selves are "no longer impaled on their moment but dead and free of the traps set for them by their era" (IMAC, 322). In death comes freedom but also the hope of permanency and transcendence. For Zuckerman, the act of narration and storytelling serve a similar purpose in the novel both for the characters he is concerned with, and in relation to his own life story.

II. *The Human Stain*

i) "Pass[ing] for knowing" (HS, 209)

In *The Human Stain* Zuckerman once again examines the life story of an American individual felled by the intrusion of the historical moment into his present and private life. After sharing this narrative inquiry with Murray Ringold in *I Married a Communist*, *The Human Stain* returns Zuckerman to the position of primary narrator. In the present-time of the novel Zuckerman is still living in the relative seclusion that Murray warns him against in the closing pages of *I Married a Communist*. *The Human Stain* opens with an account of how this seclusion was temporarily disrupted by Coleman Silk, Zuckerman's neighbour and a Classics professor at the nearby Athena College. Coleman comes to Zuckerman, somewhat like the Swede in *American Pastoral*, because he wants Zuckerman to write his story. Coleman tells Zuckerman of how he recently lost his position at the college over an incident of alleged racism. While querying his class about the whereabouts of two "missing students"²²⁰ (HS, 6) whom Coleman had never seen before, he asks "Does anyone know these people? Do they exist or are they spooks?" (HS, 6)

²²⁰ Roth, *The Human Stain* (London: Vintage, 2000), 6.

When it subsequently emerges that the two absent students are black, it is ascertained that Coleman's employment of the word "spooks" was intended in its racially pejorative meaning.

While Coleman insists that he was using "spooks" for its primary meaning, to refer to the possible "ectoplasmic character" of the absent students, the students in question nonetheless persist with their complaint of racism and the college takes appropriate action. Coleman resigns from his position in outrage at the "spectacularly false" (*HS*, 7) charge. When Coleman's wife, Iris, dies suddenly from a stroke in the midst of the controversy, Coleman attributes her death to stress brought on by the charge of racism. In his anger he begins to write "*Spooks*" (*HS*, 14), a nonfiction book recounting the "story in all its absurdity" (*HS*, 11). Coleman, knowing that Zuckerman is a writer seeks out his help and demands that he write his story: "He all but ordered me to" (*HS*, 11). What initially emerges from this incident, however, is not a book but a friendship. It is only in the aftermath of Coleman's death, precisely at the moment that Zuckerman is standing at Coleman's graveside that Zuckerman decides to write Coleman's story. The book he writes is not "*Spooks*" but "*The Human Stain*", an imaginative re-telling of Coleman's life story primarily initiated by Zuckerman's discovery that Coleman was in fact a black man who had spent his adult life passing for both white and Jewish.

Zuckerman's narrative is an attempt to engage with Coleman's subjectivity by reconstructing his story in order to understand why he chose to racially pass and how he negotiated the consequences of his decision. The framing device and the imaginative reinvention of the protagonist resembles the narrative strategy of *American Pastoral*. In *The Human Stain*, however, Zuckerman is not "jettisoned" as he is in *American Pastoral* but remains an active participant in Coleman's story; playing the role of detective as he tries to piece together Coleman's history and the details surrounding his death. What is initially known about the "facts" of Coleman's life is that at the time of his death he was having an affair with a thirty-four-year old cleaning lady who works at the college. Faunia Farley is being terrorized by her former husband, Les Farley, a violent and disturbed Vietnam Veteran who is outraged when he discovers her affair with Coleman. Both Coleman and Faunia are killed when their car careens from the road. Zuckerman is suspicious towards the accidental nature of the incident and believes Les to be

directly involved. At Coleman's funeral Zuckerman meets Coleman's sister Ernestine, and Ernestine fills in some of the gaps in Coleman's story; mainly details of Coleman's early life and the devastating impact his decision to pass had on his family. Working from this sketch of Coleman's story Zuckerman recreates Coleman Silk and re-presents his life in "*The Human Stain*".

Zuckerman's novel stands in ironic contrast to Coleman's initial attempt to represent his story through narrative in "*Spooks*". Coleman is frustrated by the ineffectualness of the effort. "I quit" (*HS*, 19) he tells Zuckerman:

I can't do what the pros do. Writing about myself, I can't maneuver the creative remove. Page after page, it is still the raw thing. It's a parody of the self-justifying memoir. The hopelessness of explanation. (*HS*, 19)

Zuckerman explains that while most writers reaching this "standstill" (*HS*, 19) would be reduced to a "state of suicidal despair" (*HS*, 20), Coleman seemed instead to have been set free:

Coleman, by abandoning the book [...] had somehow managed to swim free not only from the wreck of the book but from the wreck of his life. Without the book he appeared now to be without the slightest craving to set the record straight; shed of the passion to clear his name and criminalize as murderers his opponents, he was embalmed no longer in injustice. (*HS*, 20)

This freeing is directly accompanied by Coleman initiating Zuckerman into his past. While he does not reveal the primary secret his life has been, he begins to "rhapsodize about the great by-gone days" (*HS*, 20) and in particular his relationships with women. This bond he forms with Zuckerman, homosocial in nature, is an attempt to achieve a level of self-revelation which he could not accomplish with "*Spooks*". Zuckerman reveals how he couldn't make sense of Coleman's joyous abandoning of the book, "I couldn't understand it, and at first I couldn't bring myself to believe it either" (*HS*, 20). It is only in the aftermath of Coleman's death and with the subsequent discovery of Coleman's secret that Zuckerman begins to understand: "he had to abandon [it] (*because of the secret, I now realized*)" (*HS*, 337) The "secret" is Coleman's attempt to:

become a new being. To bifurcate. The drama that underlies America's story, the high drama that is upping and leaving—and the energy and cruelty that rapturous drive demands. (*HS*, 342)

Coleman is the “walking text” of this drama. His art, which Zuckerman defines in the following quoted passage as “being a white man” is essentially the art of impersonation, the “act of invention”, of waking up to “be what you had made yourself”. Coleman is thus presented as a recognisably Rothian invented, and by extension, concealed self; his character fits readily into the “walking text[s]” of Roth’s oeuvre. Contemplating the living invention that was Coleman’s existence Zuckerman thinks:

Of course you couldn’t write the book. You’d written the book—the book was your life. Writing personally is exposing and concealing at the same time, but with you it could only be concealment and so it would never work. Your book was your life—and your art? Once you set the thing in motion, your art was being a white man [...] that was your singular act of invention: every day you woke up to be what you had made yourself. (*HS*, 345)

The Human Stain can be regarded as following a literary trajectory of black-to-white passing novels that include such works as Charles Chesnutt’s *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912), and Nella Larson’s *Passing* (1929). The notable difference with *The Human Stain* is the fact that it is a black-to-white passing novel written by a white, Jewish-American male author. This activates a confusion that the novel itself problematises. Coleman doesn’t just pass as white, he passes as Jewish and ironically, he is murdered by the anti-Semitic Les Farley. When Charles McGrath in an interview with Roth suggested that the book is “about issues of race and Judaism and where the two intersect”, Roth was clear in his response when he told McGrath: “Not race and Judaism. There’s nothing about Judaism in this book”.²²¹ Roth instead explains Coleman’s decision to pass as Jewish as “strictly utilitarian”:

As a means of deception, as a social disguise, as a pretext for his appearance. He doesn’t want to be a Jew for anything like the reasons that Frank Alpine, say, in Malamud’s novel *The Assistant* wants to be a Jew. Coleman’s choice has nothing to do with the ethical, spiritual, theological or historical aspects of Judaism. It has nothing to do with wanting to belong to another ‘we.’ It’s a cunning choice that successfully furnishes him with a disguise in the flight

²²¹ Roth, “Zuckerman’s Alter Brain”, interview by Charles McGrath. *The New York Times*.

from his own 'we.' The choice is strictly utilitarian—as so much is for this man.²²²

As discussed in Chapter One, Roth describes the act of writing as the “sly and cunning masquerade” (RMAO, 123). The terms Roth uses when describing Coleman can be equated with the terms he uses to describe the act of writing and representing the self. They exemplify the modes of living that Roth, as a writer obsessed with representations of self, continually forwards in his explorations of “the lies people can sustain behind the masks of their real faces” (RMAO, 124). Here Roth explicitly posits the act of impersonation as a cunning masquerade, a form of deception that, as this thesis has been demonstrating, is integral to Roth’s concept of self. Following on from Roth’s assertion that Coleman’s “choice is strictly utilitarian”, there is no evidence in the novels to suggest otherwise, the analysis of *The Human Stain* that follows will not attempt to situate Roth within the context of the literature of racial passing. Instead it will consider Roth’s adaptation of the form as yet another exploration of masquerade, self-making, and self-transformation, that does not necessarily entail or require a specific racial position: “To go around in disguise. To act a character. To *pass* oneself off as one is not” (RMAO, 123 emphasis added). Each of the characters in Roth’s American Trilogy “pass”, “act” and “disguise” themselves, as indeed do various other characters of Roth’s oeuvre discussed throughout this thesis. The Swede attempts to “pass” as and all American “Johnny Appleseed”; he tries to “act” and embody his concepts of the ideal and unconfined American identity. Similarly, Ira tries to simultaneously “pass”, “act” and “disguise” himself as a social reformer, a Communist, and a cultured bourgeois whose political views contrast sharply with his violent past and his lived reality. Pipik passes as “Philip Roth”, “Philip Roth” then acts as Pipik and finally Philip Roth the author passes as “Philip Roth” the protagonist, and so forth. Roth’s primary concern is not with race but with the notion of the American capacity for self-invention, a concern echoed throughout the book not just through Coleman, but through Zuckerman and the secondary characters of Delphine Roux and Faunia Farley. It is this masquerade, this act of hiddenness and secrecy, as opposed to racial specificity, that dominates my

²²² Ibid.

exploration of *The Human Stain* in the sections that follow. First however, we will turn to examine Zuckerman.

ii) "I completely lost my equilibrium" (*HS*, 37): Zuckerman

Prior to befriending Coleman, Zuckerman had thought himself to be content with his decision to live a secluded lifestyle. Left incontinent and impotent after prostate surgery, Zuckerman is continually aware of his body's failing physical condition. As he explains below however, his impotence is the physical manifestation of a way of life that Zuckerman had chosen prior to the surgery, about which he states:

I want to make it clear that it wasn't impotence that led me into a reclusive existence. To the contrary. [...] My point is that by moving here I had altered deliberately my relationship to the sexual caterwaul, [...] because I couldn't meet the costs of its clamoring anymore, could no longer marshal the wit, the strength, the patience, the illusion, the irony, the ardor, the egoism, the resilience—or the toughness, or the shrewdness, or the falseness, the dissembling, the dual being, the erotic professionalism—to deal with its array of misleading and contradictory meanings. As a result, I was able to lessen a little my postoperative shock at the prospect of permanent impotence by remembering that all the surgery had done was to make me hold to a renunciation to which I had already voluntarily submitted. (*HS*, 36-37)

On meeting and befriending Coleman, Zuckerman confesses that "all the comforting delusions about the serenity achieved through enlightened resignation vanished, and I completely lost my equilibrium" (*HS*, 37). The "renunciation" and "deliberately [altered] relationship with the sexual caterwaul" gives way to a growing unease in relation to his current existence. Coleman draws Zuckerman out of this reclusive state through a friendship that by proxy questions the reasons for his seclusion. He questions the reclusive existence that he had hitherto "voluntarily submitted" (*HS*, 37) and asks: "How can anyone say, 'No, this isn't a part of life,' since it always is?" (*HS*, 37) Zuckerman becomes intrigued by Coleman and his story and, despite his fidelity to isolationism, Coleman begins to severely disrupt his chosen existence:

His difficulties mattered to me, and this despite my determination to concern myself, in whatever time *I* have left, with nothing but the daily demands of work, to be engrossed by nothing but solid work, in search of adventure

nowhere else—to have not even a life of my own to care about, let alone somebody else's. (HS, 43)

His friendship with Coleman leaves Zuckerman experiencing the exhilaration of homosocial courtship:

I was gushing and I knew it. [...] in the way you are when you're a kid and you think you've found a soul mate in the new boy down the street and you feel yourself drawn by the force of the courtship and so act as you don't normally do and a lot more openly than you may even want to. (HS, 43)

In meeting Coleman and hearing him talk about his affair with Faunia Farley Zuckerman is drawn, if not back into the "sexual caterwaul" (HS, 37), then back to a realisation that he has not fully transcended the physical longings of the body. Through Coleman he is forced to once again acknowledge the "contaminant of sex, the redeeming corruption that de-idealizes the species and keeps us everlasting mindful of the matter we are" (HS, 37). After Coleman confides in him about the affair, Zuckerman becomes "hypnotized by the other couple" and begins comparing them to his own "washed-out state" (HS, 37).

The intimacy also draws Zuckerman in to the extent that he is intrigued enough to want to write Coleman's story after Coleman dies. This intrigue, which amounts to a type of compassionate or vampiric obsession, has become an identifying feature of the trilogy. While Zuckerman is no longer the primary subject of his writing, the subjects that he now chooses to write about are still integrally linked to his own sense of self. Swede Levov and Ira Ringold return Zuckerman to his past; Swede being concerned primarily with his boyhood and early youth, Ira with his adolescence and early adulthood. In *The Human Stain* however, Zuckerman's friendship with Coleman Silk forces him to confront his present and the choices he had made in his mature adult life. Zuckerman's interaction with Coleman forces him to further confront the questions posed to him by Murray in *I Married a Communist* as he begins to contemplate what his seclusion has entailed: "Abnegation of society, abstention from distraction, a self-imposed separation from every last professional yearning and social delusion and cultural poison and alluring intimacy" (HS, 43).

The growing intimacy of Coleman and Zuckerman's friendship is signified in their shared dance. Zuckerman states that there was nothing "overtly carnal"

(*HS*, 26) in this dance. However, because Coleman “was wearing only his denim shorts” and Zuckerman’s hand “rested easily on his warm back,” he concedes that the dance “wasn’t entirely a mocking act” either. (*HS*, 26) This dance initiates Zuckerman into Coleman’s past as it occurs directly after Coleman reads to Zuckerman from the letter he received from Steena, his first girlfriend; giving Zuckerman a glimpse of who Coleman was in 1948. The intimacy is also confirmed by Zuckerman’s failure to notice that he had soiled his trousers. The homoerotic suggestiveness, however latent, reconfirms the attachment and intimacy Zuckerman feels towards Coleman:

I’d been so engaged by Coleman and his story that I’d failed to monitor myself. All the while I was there, drinking a beer, dancing with him [...] I hadn’t gone off to check myself, as ordinarily I do during my waking hours (*HS*, 36).

Zuckerman’s friendship with Coleman gives Zuckerman sustenance for these “waking hours”. When Coleman is no longer living he further sustains himself through the writing and the re-invention of his friend’s life. Writing is again posited in the text as a defense, however ineffectual, against death and “all the terror of endlessness” (*HS*, 313). Writing functions in the text, as Posnock notes, “to disinter and recover those consigned to oblivion”.²²³ This is further conveyed by the fact that Zuckerman begins to write Coleman’s story while standing over Coleman’s grave: “I waited and I waited for him to speak until at last I heard him [...] And that is how all this [the book] began: by my standing alone in a darkening graveyard and entering into professional competition with death” (*HS*, 338).

iii) “neither one thing or the other” (*HS*, 98): Coleman Silk

Coleman’s decision to pass as white is one that initially comes about by accident when Doc Chizner, his boxing coach, tells him not to pretend that he was white but “not to mention that he was colored” (*HS*, 98). Remaining ambiguous about his racial identity means he is “neither one thing or the other” (*HS*, 98) Chizner tells him, “You’re Silky Silk. That’s enough. That’s the deal” (*HS*, 98-99). The “deal” opens Coleman to the possibilities of passing and simultaneously to the

²²³Posnock, *Philip Roth’s Rude Truth*, 227

exhilaration of having a secret. The text conveys that it is this secret and not the refutation of race that enthalls Coleman and subsequently Zuckerman: “astonished, unable to account for what I was thinking: he has a secret” (*HS*, 212). As his sister Ernestine states: “Coleman couldn’t wait to go through civil rights to get to his human rights, and so he skipped a step” (*HS*, 327). Possessing the secret of his race is the means by which he skips this step and this secret is directly linked to autonomy and a sense of powerful selfhood, as Coleman discovers when he accepts Chizner’s deal:

The secret of nobody’s knowing what was going on in your head, thinking whatever you wanted to think with no way of anybody’s knowing. All the other kids were always blabbing about themselves. But that wasn’t where the power was or the pleasure either. The power and pleasure were to be found in the opposite, in being counterconfessional in the same way you were a counterpuncher, [...] That’s why he liked shadow boxing and hitting the heavy bag: for the secrecy in it. (*HS*, 100)

This secrecy is also reflected in the narrative structure of the novel as the nature of Coleman’s secret is not revealed until on page eighty-six the reader is informed that Coleman is from “a model Negro family” (*HS*, 86). The reader is initially led through the narrative unaware of the exact nature of Coleman’s secret. Coleman’s passing can be read as an expression of power because in keeping his race secret he defies social constructs of identity that serve to define him in relation to his race. The initial eighty-six pages of the novel make the reader unknowingly complicit in this concealment because up until this point, Coleman has been read only in terms of his Jewish ethnicity. It is only after this point that *The Human Stain* reveals itself as a novel concerned with racial passing.

This linking of power and secrecy is essential to understanding Coleman’s decision to abandon his racial identity. The analogy between secrecy and power is discovered by Coleman at an early age. His first experience of passing, of being “neither one thing or the other” (*HS*, 98), is also integrally tied to the myth of American individualism:

So at magic, mythical West Point, where it looked to him that day as though there was more of America in every square inch of the flag flapping on the West Point flagpole than in any flag he’d ever seen, and where the iron faces of the cadets had for him the most powerful heroic significance, even here, at the patriotic center, the marrow of his country’s unbreakable spine, where his sixteen-year-old’s fantasy of the place matched perfectly the official fantasy,

where everything he saw made him feel a frenzy of love not only for himself but for all that was visible, as if everything in nature were a manifestation of his own life—the sun, the sky, the mountains, the river, the trees, just Coleman Brutus ‘Silky’ Silk carried to the millionth degree (*HS*, 101).

Coleman’s discovery of the power of secrecy here is fundamentally tied to the promise of American individualism, and is imbued with an added significance by the very fact that he enacts it at West Point, “the patriotic center, the marrow of his country’s unbreakable spine” (*HS*, 101). The “magic” of “mythical West Point, is, for Coleman, the promise of individualism. Coleman’s frenzy is for the “manifestation of his own life”; the manifestation of his autonomy. In the text, the expression of this autonomy is not manifested in “the sun, the sky, the mountains, the rivers, the trees,” but in the secret, the concealment of his race that he enters into at West Point. Being “neither one thing or the other” is to transcend classification, if Coleman cannot be classified then he cannot be known, and by extension cannot be determined. Thus, in *The Human Stain*, for Coleman the retention of his secret becomes synonymous with the retention of the autonomous self. This secrecy that is initiated at West Point is posited as “self-knowledge but concealed” (*HS*, 108). Zuckerman contemplating this idea asks, “What is as powerful as that?” (*HS*, 108).

Coleman’s awakening to the possibilities offered to him by passing occurs when he attends Howard University in Washington and is called “a nigger” (*HS*, 102) for the first time. This experience completely de-centres Coleman’s concept of self:

At East Orange High the class valedictorian, in the segregated South just another nigger. In the segregated South there were no separate identities, [...] No such subtleties allowed. Nigger—and it meant *him*. (*HS*, 102-103)

Having the word “nigger” directed at him brings Coleman into a social reality he had hitherto been protected from. We are told that “never before, for all his precocious cleverness, had Coleman realised how protected his life had been” (*HS*, 105). This is the first instance in the novel where Coleman’s fate is shown to hinge on the impact of a word, the second being the “spooks” incident that instigates the charge of racism. In the novel and Zuckerman’s imaginative effort to understand Coleman’s decision to pass, language is shown to be crucial to the process of transformation. As a child Coleman had “learned things had classifications,” (*HS*,

93) and he had “learned the power of naming precisely” (*HS*, 93). When he chooses to pass it is this very aspect of classification and naming that he decides to evade, as he becomes “neither one thing or the other” (*HS*, 98) and instead decides to “play his skin however he wanted, color himself just as he chose” (*HS*, 109).

Zuckerman locates Coleman’s decision to pass as white not in a desire to *be* white, but purely in his desire to live without restraint: “All he’d ever wanted, from earliest childhood on, was to be free: not black, not even white—just on his own and free. He meant to insult no one by his choice [...] nor was he staging some sort of protest against his race” (*HS*, 120). As Ross Posnock notes Coleman’s passing is “less a betrayal of race than an assertion of modernist individualism”.²²⁴ The barriers to this individualism, as Coleman sees it, are embedded in a word such as “nigger” but in Washington he also discovers the restraints implied in the word Negro: “he was a nigger and nothing else and he was a *Negro* and nothing else” (*HS*, 108). For Coleman being the victim of racial prejudice is as limiting to his sense of self as being ethically bound to one racial group and so he concludes:

You can’t let the big they impose its bigotry on you any more than you can let the little they become a we and impose its ethics on you. Not the tyranny of the we and its we-talk. And everything that the we wants to pile on your head. Never for him the tyranny of the we that is dying to suck you in, the coercive, inclusive, historical, inescapable, moral *we*, with its insidious *E pluribus unum*.” (*HS*, 108)

Coleman instead wants “the raw I with all its agility. Self-discovery [...] Singularity. The passionate struggle for singularity. The singular animal” (*HS*, 108). Coleman cannot abide by the constraints of the “we”. He sees it as an utter imposition on his “particular I” (*HS*, 109). Against the “tyranny of the we” Coleman positions his “[s]ingularity”, a singularity that manifests itself in the “sliding relationship with everything” (*HS*, 108). It is within this “sliding relationship” that Coleman locates his power against social and cultural determinism. But it is not until the death of his father that Coleman feels free to enact the self as agile; “not static but sliding” (*HS*, 108).

Coleman’s father had been the “enormous [protective] barrier” (*HS*, 106) that served to shelter the young Coleman from early experiences of racism, described in the text as “the great American menace” (*HS*, 106). While Coleman

²²⁴Posnock, *Philip Roth’s Rude Truth*, 205

recognises his father's actions as strength and "fortitude" (*HS*, 105), he also sees them as an admission of defenselessness in the face of what he "had been condemned to accept" (*HS*, 105). His father's fortitude and the unavoidable nature of his acceptance make him, however, part of the "tyranny of the we", a tyranny that Coleman does not feel free to refute while his father is alive. When his father dies suddenly Coleman realises that it was "his father who had been making up [his] story for him" (*HS*, 107) and that from now on he would have to "make it up himself" (*HS*, 107). This prospect, we are told, is initially terrifying until "out of nowhere" (*HS*, 107) it becomes "exhilarating" (*HS*, 107). The death of the father symbolises the birth of the autonomous being and it is recognised as such by Zuckerman:

Free on a scale unimaginable to his father. As free as his father had been unfree. Free now not only of his father but of all that his father ever had to endure. The impositions. The humiliations. The obstructions. The wound and the pain and the posturing and the shame—all the inward agonies of failure and defeat. Free instead on the big stage. Free to go ahead and be stupendous. Free to enact the boundless, self-defining drama of the pronouns we, they, and I. (*HS*, 109)

For Coleman, "the objective was for his fate to be determined not by the ignorant, hate-filled intentions of a hostile world but, to whatever degree humanly possible, by his own resolve" (*HS*, 121). Being "no longer circumscribed and defined by his father was like finding that all the clocks wherever he looked had stopped, and all the watches, and that there was no way of knowing what time it was" (*HS*, 107). Coleman's father's death is equated with time-stoppage, placing Coleman outside time and therefore outside history, for this is the other deterministic factor he must try to transcend. With the father removed as an obstacle to liberation, Coleman is free to erase his personal history by abandoning his remaining family. This is particularly conveyed by Zuckerman in the scene where he imagines Coleman telling his mother of his decision to pass as white. As Zuckerman presents it here Coleman enacts a type of matricide:

He was murdering her. You don't have to murder your father. The world will do that for you. There are plenty of forces out there to get your father. The world will take care of him, as it had indeed taken care of Mr. Silk. Who there is to murder is the mother, and that's what he saw he was doing to her [...] Murdering her on behalf of his exhilarating notion of freedom. (*HS*, 138)

This murder metaphorically severs the bloodline that connects him to his racial identity. This act of severance is the defining moment in what Coleman takes to be an act of emancipation and it is registered by his mother as such when she tells him: "You're white as snow and you think like a slave" (*HS*, 139). Coleman, free as he is, feels bound by his racial identity precisely because he is aware of the social constructions of black identity and racist stereotyping that had hindered his father. A "white," Coleman's father tells him, "will always speak to you as though you are dumb" because there is always "the presumption of intellectual inferiority" (*HS*, 103). Coleman wishes to escape these socially imposed constructs of "inferiority", intellectual or otherwise, that he sees as fictions written to accompany a skin colour or race. In passing, he seeks to transcend these socially sanctioned narratives imposed on black identity by a prejudiced and predominantly racist white America.

Coleman does not want to be known on the basis of presumptive, and in this case racially prejudiced "knowledge", and his resistance to classification goes beyond what is inferred by racial constructions. Coleman doesn't even want to be known by those closest to him. The "cruelty" (*HS*, 342) inherent in Coleman's drive for autonomy leads him to radically disown his family. Aside from his family, this desire to be unknowable (and therefore uncategorisable in relation to social constructs of racial identity) is also apparent in his relationship with his wife Iris and, previous to that, Ellie Magee possibly the only other person after Coleman's first girlfriend Steena whom Zuckerman imagines to have known Coleman's secret. Although with Ellie Coleman initially finds the unburdening a relief, ultimately "it lacks the ambition—it fails to feed that conception of himself that's been driving him all his life" (*HS*, 135). With Iris, however, "he has the secret again. And the *gift* to be secretive again" (*HS*, 135). It "gives him back his life on the scale he wants to live it" and enables him to be "an actable self big enough to house his ambition" (*HS*, 136).

Coleman's determination to carry out his self-transformation is taken to extremes of rigorousness that, in the following cases, risk exposing his secret. On three occasions he betrays the concealment of his racial identity. The "spooks" incident, which occasions the charge of racism, is ironic from the onset not only

because it doesn't make sense logically,²²⁵ but because if he had been identified as a black male, such a charge would not have been made. But more interesting are the occasions where Coleman lets slip a racially pejorative insult, one occasioned against a black man and the other against a white. Newly arrived on the boxing scene in New York when asked by his coach to allow his opponent, who is black, stay in the boxing match for longer than he should, Coleman tells his boxing coach that he doesn't "carry no nigger" (*HS*, 117). Later, after he has resigned from Athena he tells his young lawyer, Nelson Primus, who seeks to advise him on his relationship with Faunia Farley, that he never wants to see his "lily-white face" (*HS*, 81) again.

These incidents are occasions when Coleman places a question mark above his own ease with his re-invention. In the former Coleman says "I don't carry no nigger" simply because he can; it emphasises what is permitted by his reinvention and it underlines just how far he is willing to take this reinvention: "That's how obstinate he was, that's how secretive he was [...] that's how much he meant business" (*HS*, 117). In the latter, however, despite the assertion that "as a heretofore unknown amalgam, of the most unlike of American historic undesirables, he now made sense" (*HS*, 132), his parting insult in fact renders him nonsensical by the very fact that Coleman is a "white" man racially abusing another white man. As Shostak notes Coleman's language here "point[s] toward a kind of racial consciousness—and self-consciousness—that a white man would have no call to possess."²²⁶ Thus, the term "lily-white" leaves Nelson Primus confounded as to its meaning, "why white?" he asks (*HS*, 82). Commenting on this slippage Brett Ashley Kaplan notes how Primus's confusion arises from his inability to "read [Coleman] differently" that is to say, other than the "white" man he perceives him to be.²²⁷ This slippage is also the first clue to the reader as to the nature of Coleman's secret²²⁸:

²²⁵ Coleman, in his defense states "Consider the context: Do they exist *or* are they spooks?" Spooks is primarily taken to refer to ghosts, "ectoplasmic character[s]" but also to "an invidious term sometimes applied to blacks." (*HS*, 6) Were Coleman's statement to be read in terms of its racial implications, then the question "Do they exist *or* are they [black?]" does not make sense given that Coleman is clearly interrogating their absence from his class.

²²⁶ Shostak, *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives*, 259.

²²⁷ Brett Ashley Kaplan, "Reading Race and the Conundrums of Reconciliation in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*", Halio and Siegel eds., 187.

²²⁸ The blurb on the book's cover already alerts the reader to the fact that "Coleman Silk has a secret". It's the uncovering of this secret that drives the narrative.

How one is revealed or undone by the perfect word. What burns away the camouflage and the covering and the concealment? This, the right word uttered spontaneously, without one's even having to think. (*HS*, 84)

Contemplating Coleman's character Zuckerman identifies a talent for secrecy as Coleman's defining characteristic:

It's the secret that's his magnetism. It's something *not* there that beguiles, and it's what's been drawing me all along, the enigmatic *it* that he holds apart as his and no one else's. He's set himself up like the moon to be only half visible. There is a blank. That's all I can say. (*HS*, 213)

It is this "blank", this "blotting out" and "excision" (*HS*, 213) that makes Coleman unknowable. The text, however, is still dubious towards the invention, especially with regards to the extent to which Coleman has achieved autonomy. In a telling passage, where Zuckerman imagines Coleman revealing his secret to Faunia, his autonomy is put into question:

he could not in the end resist confessing to her [...] the first and last person since Ellie Magee for whom he could strip down and turn around so as to expose, protruding from his naked back, the mechanical key by which he had wound himself up to set off on his great escapade. (*HS*, 337)

The "mechanical key" equates Coleman with a type of automaton, someone who is not in control of his life and although he has "wound himself up" the mechanical self he has set in motion betrays the concept of impersonation because it becomes as empty and fictitious as the socially constructed identity he has attempted to avoid by being self-made.

iv) "Self-made. Nobody knew her. Made herself" (*HS*, 274): Delphine Roux

A similar effect is seen in the characterisation of Delphine Roux, the young French-born Professor of Languages and Literature who leads the charge of racism against Coleman. In the text Delphine is associated with the "ecstasy of sanctimony" (*HS*, 2), which Zuckerman identifies with Hawthorne's "persecuting spirit" (*HS*, 2). The novel is set in the summer of 1998 against the backdrop of the Clinton/ Lewinsky scandal, when, according to Zuckerman, "a president's penis was on everyone's mind, and life, in all its shameless impurity, one again

confounded America” (HS, 3). The drama of Coleman’s trial in *The Human Stain* can be read in terms of the scandal; particularly in relation to the media and national obsession that surrounded the events and details of the presidential impeachment. This is made explicit in the “anonymous” letter Delphine sends to Coleman in relation to his affair with Faunia Farley:

Everyone knows you’re
sexually exploiting an
abused, illiterate
woman half your
age. (HS, 38)

In the text Delphine Roux, with her obstinate insistence on political correctness taken to a level of absurdism, is exemplary of the political or moral “nausea” (HS, 3) gripping America in the summer of 1998; as Zuckerman states: “No, if you haven’t lived through 1998, you don’t know what sanctimony is” (HS, 2). Coleman is posited by Roth as a microcosmic victim of the “enormous piety binge, a purity binge” (HS, 2) “unleashed on the nation” (HS, 3) during this period of American history.

In many ways Delphine’s story parallels Coleman’s. Delphine has come to America to re-invent herself and to escape the impositions of her family. In particular she wishes to distance herself from her mother whose personal success makes it impossible for Delphine to carve out an existence of her own. This strikes obvious parallels with Coleman’s “murdering” of his mother and his desire to escape the imposing influence of his father. Delphine decides to embrace the individualism promised by America:

I will go to America and be the author of my life, she says; I will construct myself outside the orthodoxy of my family’s given, I will fight *against* the given, impassioned subjectivity carried to the limit, individualism at its best (HS, 273).

Delphine’s desire for self-transformation leaves her feeling unfulfilled and isolated. In America, the individualism she seeks is experienced as alienation and isolation as she “winds up the author of nothing” (HS, 273):

Decountried, isolated, estranged, confused about everything essential to a life, in a desperate state of bewildered longing and surrounded on all sides by diminishing forces defining her as the enemy. And all because she’d gone

eagerly in search of an existence of her own. All because she'd been courageous and refused to take the prescribed view of herself. She seemed to herself to have subverted herself in the altogether admirable effort to *make* herself. (HS, 272)

Delphine seeks a similar existence to Coleman. She refutes the "prescribed" existence and strives to be self-determined. Like Coleman she despises "ancestor worship" (HS, 144) and is repelled by her family genealogy. She "hated all those families, the pure and ancient aristocracy of the provinces, all of them thinking the same, looking the same, sharing the same stifling religious obedience" (HS, 275). Her family is one that holds respect "not for the individual (*down* with the individual!) but for the traditions of the family" (HS, 275). Delphine is "Self-made. Nobody knew her. Made herself" (HS, 274). Like Coleman, in her self-invention Delphine is unknown, "unclassifiable": "[b]eing unclassifiable is a part of her *bildungsroman*" (HS, 271). Zuckerman's analysis of her pointedly echoes his description of Coleman as being "neither one thing or the other" (HS, 98) when he describes Delphine as existing "neither there nor here..." (HS, 267). In America she finds herself classified as a "French woman, [...] a French feminist" and is placed within the pre-conceived fictions that constitute this socially defined category: "The Frenchwoman is intelligent, she's sexy, she's *truly* independent" (HS, 264). She is perceived by her colleagues in terms of this structured identity: "All they see is Delphine using what she understands they sarcastically call 'her little French aura'" (HS, 271). Delphine finds herself caught between the structures imposed on her by others and the language within which she has constructed herself, mainly that of the discourse of literary theory. Her life is thus comparable to a "walking text". Her life is referred to in terms of a *bildungsroman* (HS, 271); implying that her self-identity is contained within the discourse of representation through language. Delphine strives to be "unclassifiable" (HS, 271) but she is continually positioned within the constructions of "French exoticism" present among her colleagues in Athena college.

In America Delphine discovers that to be unclassifiable is not desirable: "Be unclassifiable here, be something they cannot reconcile, and they torment you for it" (HS, 271). Unlike Coleman, however, Delphine's self-invention fails. For example, her attempts to be unknown end in exposure, one that is registered through writing in the composition of the "anonymous" letter to Coleman. The

note that Delphine composes and sends to Coleman is clearly recognisable to him: “She hadn’t made any effort that Coleman could see to put him off the trail by falsifying her hand” (*HS*, 38). Yet when Zuckerman considers the composition of the note from Delphine’s perspective he imagines that she felt she had hidden herself adequately. Interestingly, Delphine places faith in her concealment by taking on the voice of her American colleagues: “Only in the anonymous note to Coleman Silk did she adopt their rhetoric [...] deliberate[ly], to hide her identity” (*HS*, 270). The note testifies to the difficulty of “concealing the marks of one’s identity” (*HS*, 38). Coleman and Zuckerman read the handwriting as Delphine’s identifying mark by comparing it to samples of her “undisguised” script:

the telltale European sevens [...] a y, an s, an x, here a word-ending *e* with a wide loop, here an *e* looking something like an *i* when nestled up against an adjacent *d* but more like a conventionally written *e* when preceding an *r* [...] he [Coleman] showed me where his full name appeared on the envelope and where it appeared in her interview with Tracy Cummings [one of the students accusing Coleman of racism] (*HS*, 38-39).

All of Delphine’s many attempts to escape and transcend categorising through self-invention prove futile as she is unable to escape the identities people attach to her; even so far as classifying her “sevens” as European. She is motivated, like Coleman, by the drive to “master [...] oneself”, but in spite of this ends up the “author of nothing” (*HS*, 273). This recalls what Coleman’s mother warns him of when she tells him “all your attempts to escape will only lead you back to where you began” (*HS*, 140).

Shostak considers the characterisation of Delphine a “savage portrait”.²²⁹ But savage may be too harsh a term, because Delphine, in her attempts at self-invention is no different to several of Roth’s key protagonists in the works discussed throughout this thesis. Ira, the Swede, Sabbath, the protagonists of *Operation Shylock*, Coleman Silk, and indeed Zuckerman all partake in varying acts of self-transformation. Shostak suggests that the portrait of Delphine amounts to “subtextual penitence on Zuckerman’s—and, by extension, Roth’s—part”.²³⁰ Shostak argues that Delphine’s self-invention may be considered less vital to her presentation of self because her privileged background “look[s] like very little

²²⁹ Shostak, *Philip Roth, Countertexts, Counterlives*, n.27, 305.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*

suffering indeed.”²³¹ In this statement Shostak implies that self-transformation is somehow more valid or acceptable if it comes from a position of “suffering”. Within a corpus as vast and varying as Roth’s, it is not possible to set a definition for the “suffering” Shostak deems appropriate to “the urge towards self-inventions”.²³² Delphine’s position as a “privileged” individual does not exclude her from the potentialities, possibilities, and appeal of self-transformation. Self-transformation, this thesis argues, is vital to Roth’s representation of selfhood and has never been limited to “suffering” protagonists.

Roth’s portrayal of Delphine is not utterly without sympathy as Roth portrays a person at odds with their adopted country; an experience Roth has explored in *The Counterlife* and *Deception*. Delphine experiences a similar feeling of displacement in America where, despite her “pride in her fluency”, she doesn’t understand the culture she is living in:

Here she operates at fifty percent of her intelligence, and in Paris she understood every nuance. What’s the point of being smart here when, because I am not from here, I am de facto dumb...Thinking that the only English she really understands—no, the only *American* she understands—is academic American, which is hardly American, which is why [...] this will never be her home. (*HS*, 275-276)

In America, Delphine has “a totally frontal vision, the vision of an emigrant, a displaced person, a *misplaced* person” (*HS*, 276). While Shostak detects “a tone of mockery”²³³ over such declarations, the portrayal is redeemed by Delphine’s own awareness that she is overstating the case: “Why did I leave? Because of my mother’s shadow? [...] Everything that I loved I gave up. People do that when their countries are impossible to live in because the fascists have taken charge but not because of their mother’s shadow” (*HS*, 276). Delphine’s displacement is self-imposed and therefore lacking the legitimised status of the persecuted émigré; for example the Czech woman “Philip” converses with in *Deception* who had to emigrate as a result of persecution. Delphine’s self-invention leaves her questioning her inability to comprehend her adopted culture. In contrast, for Coleman, self-reinvention was like “being fluent in another language” (*HS*, 136).

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Ibid., 261.

Nonetheless, Roth is not beyond extending a sympathetic tone to her attempts at self-transformation:

There is something very mean about life that it should have done this to her. At its very heart, very mean and very vengeful, ordering a fate not according to the laws of logic but to the antagonistic whim of perversity. (HS, 272)

This could also be read as a summation of Coleman's choice to live as a white Jewish male. Delphine's attempts at self-invention are thwarted by what she cannot control, even though, like Coleman, she is ironically undone by her own actions: "Her own hand had delivered the ruinous blow" (HS, 278). Just as Coleman utters the word that brings about his downfall, Delphine incorrectly sends her lonely hearts ad, an ad seeking out a man whose description unmistakably resembles Coleman, to the entire college faculty. The event is described in terms of an unconscious act of self-sabotage:

She didn't want to send it. She wrote it, yes, but she was embarrassed to send it and didn't want to send it and she *didn't* send it—yet it *went*. The same with the anonymous letter—she didn't want to send it, carried it to New York with no intention of ever sending it, and *it* went. (HS, 279)

This type of action encapsulates the description of Delphine as someone who is "Afraid of being exposed, dying to be seen" (HS, 185). The anonymous letter and the emailed ad precisely symbolise this predicament, a predicament that Coleman also experiences, however unconsciously.

v) Faunia Farley

Faunia Farley also engages in the act of self-transformation. However, her re-invention takes the form of a depletion of self to the extent that she pretends to be illiterate. Faunia is:

The kid who hides herself and lies, the kid who can't read, who *can* read, who *pretends* she can't read, takes willingly upon herself this crippling shortcoming all the better to impersonate a member of a subspecies to which she does not belong and need not belong but to which, for every wrong reason, she wants him to believe she belongs. Wants herself to believe she belongs. (HS, 164)

Faunia's self-invention is an escape from a family background in which she was sexually abused by her step-father. Her past also contains the story of how her two children died tragically in a house fire when she leaves them unsupervised. Faunia's escape into the role of "illiterate abused woman" (*HS*, 39) is a rejection of socially approved models of female American identity. In this role, "she cannot get enough of the toxins: of all you're not supposed to be" (*HS*, 297). This escape, however tragic, is also the solace she offers to Coleman. She tells Coleman:

Close all the doors [...] All the social ways of thinking, shut 'em down. Everything the wonderful society is asking? The way we're set up socially? 'I should, I should, I should'? Fuck all that. What you're supposed to be, what you're supposed to do, all that, it just kills everything (*HS*, 229).

This is "the deal" she offers Coleman. She can "keep dancing" and give him "the secret little moment [...] that slice out of time" (*HS*, 229) if he is prepared to accept the moment for what it is.

Faunia's dance, the "slice out of time" is a refutation of history and the socially constructed identities it imposes on the individual, as is her impersonation of illiteracy. This dance is one of three significant dances relayed in the text, the other two being Steena's dance for Coleman and, as discussed previously, the dance shared by Coleman and Zuckerman. Each of these dances reflects an intimate and private moment, a moment that temporarily enables the self to be free of masking disguises. When Steena's dance finishes we are told that she "put her hands up to hide her face, half meaning, half pretending to cover her shame. But the gesture protected her against nothing" (*HS*, 116). Similarly, when Faunia dances for Coleman it is registered as a heightened awareness of seeing and being seen: "he's seeing her, every particle, he's seeing her and she knows that he's seeing her" (*HS*, 227). While initially she is under his gaze there is a "formal transfer of power" as the gaze is returned and she tells him, "'You know what? I see you.'" (*HS*, 228). These instances free these selves from their respective impersonations, which, at times can ironically seem like imprisonments.

It is during such freeing moments that Zuckerman imagines Coleman revealing his secret to Faunia. When Zuckerman ponders the nature of Coleman and Faunia's relationship, he imagines that it was solidified by her knowing his secret: "he had told her his whole story. Faunia alone knew how Coleman Silk had come about being himself" (*HS*, 213). In the imagined scenario, Zuckerman

envisions Coleman asking Faunia “What would you think [...] if I told you I wasn’t a white man?” (*HS*, 341), to which Faunia responds “I would think that you were telling me something I had figured out a long time ago” (*HS*, 341). Figuring out the other is an essential part of the narrative. Yet despite Zuckerman’s telling (revealing) Coleman’s story (secret) the text continually underwrites itself by testifying to be the work of Zuckerman’s imagination. At one point Zuckerman interrupts the narrative to question his own summations, when in relation to Faunia’s “knowing” he asks:

How do I know she knew? I don’t. I couldn’t know that either. I can’t know. Now that they’re dead, nobody can know. For better or worse I can only do what everybody does who thinks that they know. I imagine. I am forced to imagine. It happens to be what I do for a living. It is my job. It’s now all I do. (*HS*, 213)

Faunia, in particular, demonstrates the difficulty of attaining any form of truth within the novel that cannot be traced to impersonation. When it is revealed that she had in fact kept a diary and that her illiteracy was merely an impersonation and part of her self-transformation, we are forced to reconsider the nature of her character. (*HS*, 297) While Debra Shostak sees this revelation as Roth making “a mockery of Faunia’s attempt to escape history” because it “refutes her pretence at illiteracy”²³⁴ and exposes her self-invention, it could be said, in opposition, that the revelation is not intended to mock Faunia’s attempt but more so to reinforce a primary theme of the novel, and of the trilogy, that knowledge of the other is based on epistemological error. As Zuckerman states in *American Pastoral*:

The fact remains that getting people right is not what living is all about anyway. It’s getting them wrong that is living, getting them wrong and wrong and wrong and then, on careful reconsideration, getting them wrong again. That’s how we know we’re alive, we’re wrong. (*AP*, 35)

Furthermore, Faunia’s diary is never actually revealed in the text; this written record of the self never comes to light and is never offered as a narrative within the text. Zuckerman may claim to know of its existence but it remains firmly out of his reach.

Faunia in her self-invention represents the rejection of purity or, more so, the rejection of the very idea of purity. The epigram to the novel is from

²³⁴ Shostak, *Philip Roth, Countertexts*, Counterlives, 261.

Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*, where Oedipus asks: "What is the rite of purification? How shall it be done?" and Creon responds: "By banishing a man, or expiation of blood by blood..." (*HS*, epigram). Roth's utilisation of lines from a Sophoclean tragedy initiates the reader into the type of narrative about to be conveyed. The man to be "banished" in order for purity to reign is Coleman. Having his disgrace paralleled with Clinton's scandal makes the ritual of impurity a central thematic concern. This theme of impurity is of course implied before the reader even reaches the epigram. "The Human Stain", when considered as a phrase, suggests something intrinsically impure about the human condition as well as being a coarse reference to skin pigmentation and, in the case of Clinton's scandal, a pointed reference to semen.

Like the scarlet letter "A" of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, a work Roth states he "was thinking of" when writing the novel, there is a shifting symbolism embedded in the term.²³⁵ The stain can be read as a marker of an "essentialist" identity, a race or ethnicity that serves to construct a socially readable self, one which implies a fixed identity. Furthermore it can be read as a branding, as in Coleman's tattoo, which becomes a reminder of "the worst night of his life": "Embedded in that blue tattoo was a true and total image of himself. The ineradicable biography was there, as was the prototype of the ineradicable, a tattoo being the emblem of what cannot ever be removed" (*HS*, 184). But the attachment that the narrative seems most willing to assume is as a stain of impurity that marks or brands nothing except humanity itself. Roth's invocation of Hawthorne rings true throughout the text as Coleman and Clinton become kinsmen of Hester Prynne. Faunia too, due to her apparent inability to read and write, which in the text is described as "the key to everything" (*HS*, 161) is regarded as a type of social outcast; a member of "the subspecies" (*HS*, 164). The "ecstasy of sanctimony" (*HS*, 2) is seen to flourish in the campus setting of Athena where to speak in an unguarded manner is to potentially broach a minefield of race and gender sensitivity.

Roth's invocation of Hawthorne is evoked throughout the text and invites obvious associations with *The Scarlet Letter*. Hawthorne, however, is not only associated with the persecuted figure of Coleman but also with Zuckerman and, by

²³⁵ Roth, "Zuckerman's Alter Brain", interview by Charles McGrath. *The New York Times*.

extension, Roth. Coleman, like Hester Prynne is expiated on account of his nonconformity. His name, as well as carrying crude associations of race (Coleman Silk) is also implicated with the persecuted figure of Ann Coleman. Ann Coleman was one of those punished during the Salem witch-hunt trials. Hawthorne was familiar with Ann Coleman as his ancestor, William Hathorne, was one of those responsible for sentencing her to a public whipping, which very nearly resulted in her death.²³⁶ Roth's use of the name is unlikely to be coincidental. By extension "Silk" is also the fabric from which Hester Prynne weaves the scarlet letter "A", changing the symbol from one of sinful branding to adornment.

It is to Faunia that Roth attributes the phrase "the human stain". When she visits the animal sanctuary and "marries" Prince, the hand-raised crow, the understanding of the human stain is put forth allegorically in relation to this "crow who doesn't know how to be a crow" because "[h]e doesn't have the right voice [...] doesn't know the crow language" (*HS*, 242). The relation of the crow to both Faunia and Coleman is evident as Prince, we are told "didn't want anybody to know his background! Ashamed of his own background!" (*HS*, 240) From here we are given the fullest definition of the human stain: "The human stain [...] we leave a stain, we leave a trail, we leave an imprint. Impurity, cruelty, abuse, error, excrement, semen—there's no other way to be here" (*HS*, 242). This is what Zuckerman attests to when he envisions the banner draped outside the white house declaring "A Human Being lives here" (*HS*, 3). And then its meaning is further conveyed:

The stain that is there before its mark. Without the sign it is there. The stain so intrinsic it doesn't require a mark. The stain that *precedes* disobedience, that *encompasses* disobedience and perplexes all explanation and understanding. It's why all the cleansing is a joke. A barbaric joke at that. The fantasy of purity is appalling. It's insane. What is the quest to purify, if not *more* impurity?" (*HS*, 242)

vi) Les Farley

Les Farley is perhaps the most historically damaged character in *The Human Stain*. Like Ira Ringold in *I Married a Communist*, he is directly and

²³⁶ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, Brian Harding ed., (London: Oxford University Press, 1990), 268.

irreparably damaged by a specific historical moment, in this case the Vietnam War. Les is a character who is frozen in time, living a nightmarish existence in which he is condemned to repeat the moment he saw his best friend killed in combat. Les is so encased in this moment from the past that it prevents him from inhabiting the present. In the text he exists as a type of sociopath. Commenting on the characterisation of Les, Lorrie Moore suggests that Roth constructed this character “from every available cliché of the Vietnam vet.”²³⁷ However, in his characterisation of Les, Roth pointedly indulges in this cliché and stereotype of the crazed veteran as a means of highlighting the cultural narrative that has built up around the traumatised veteran. Caught within this narrative of the damaged veteran, Les is shown to lack the imaginative ability for self-invention that is so central to the characters of Coleman, Delphine and Faunia. Therefore, Les is unable to *by-pass* history in the way Coleman, for instance, “skipped a step” (*HS*, 327) through the civil rights movement. Les remains tied to and defined by his traumatic experience of the Vietnam War. He is also an anti-Semite and an inherent racist whose recovering program involves tension-filled outings to Chinese restaurants where his aim is to be able to order a meal without “losing it completely and going ballistic with the Chinese waiter” (*HS*, 214). His aim in recovery is to be able to visit the memorial wall and locate the name of his best friend so that he can accept the finality of the past and move on. But when he visits the Moving Wall, a portable replica of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington, “he feels nothing” (*HS*, 252). Looking at three American flags flying at half-mast he thinks: “they are flying all the flags at half-mast in Pittsfield because it has finally been established that Les Farley is dead. It’s official: altogether dead and not merely inside” (*HS*, 253).

Despite his inability to self-invent an acceptable present, Les shares a commonality with the other characters because he is still the bearer of a secret. Les’s secrecy lies in his crime, in his killing of Coleman and Faunia; a secret that Zuckerman is determined to expose. Les is therefore an epistemological lure and Zuckerman cannot resist the impulse to discover the truth about his suspicions. As

²³⁷ Lorrie Moore, “The Wrath of Athena”, review of *The Human Stain* by Philip Roth. *The New York Times*, 7 May 2000. < <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/05/07/books/the-wrath-of-athena.html?n=Top%2fFeatures%2fBooks%2fBook%20Reviews> > [accessed July 2009].

Debra Shostak states, for Zuckerman “Les is the *vrai* [...] *Les is* the secret.”²³⁸ In the text he is therefore the greatest rival to Zuckerman’s imagination because Zuckerman believes he knows the “actual” truth of Faunia and Coleman’s death. This knowledge could potentially destabilise the narrative Zuckerman has been weaving around the “walking text[s]” of “*The Human Stain*”. As a novelist Zuckerman is compelled to reveal, to expose. This exposure, however, comes through fictional and imaginative retelling in which Zuckerman, the novelist, builds on the “facts” in order to re-create the subjectivities of his protagonists through fictions. For Zuckerman Les represents the untransformed “thing itself” (*HS*, 350), the reality that is not words:

The *fact* of him drew me on. This was not speculation. This was not meditation. This was not that way of thinking that is fiction writing. This was the thing itself. [...] Here is the killer. He is the one. (*HS*, 349-350)

In his ferocious actuality Les represents the reality that Roth says is always outstripping the novelist’s imagination and “continually outdoing our talents”.²³⁹ Les’s invention can be said to be the orchestration of Coleman and Faunia’s death. In the end he pulls off the greatest act and avoids incrimination, except perhaps through the publication of “*The Human Stain*”, the book Zuckerman is writing. Les, being “the thing itself” rivals Zuckerman’s invention but Les’s reality also threatens Nathan’s urge to expose. This rivalry is brilliantly conveyed in the closing pages of the novel where Zuckerman comes upon Les ice-fishing.

Les tells Zuckerman that he has found his secret place: “This place is like the best kept secret in the world” (*HS*, 329), to which Zuckerman replies “And now I know” (*HS*, 349). The hidden threat contained in Les’s reply, “[y]ou look like a man that can keep a secret” (*HS*, 349), is demonstrative of the double-talk that characterises this final section. Les gives Zuckerman “[a] quick look that was ninety percent opaque and unreadable and ten percent alarmingly transparent” (*HS*, 347) that sums up the essence of their exchange. Les taunts Zuckerman’s need to know by recognising his profession as one concerned with exposure. In a novel about secrets, the irony resides in the fact that the novelist by his very nature is in the business of exposure and revelation. The theme of betrayal that unites the

²³⁸ Shostak, *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives*, 265.

²³⁹ Roth, “Writing American Fiction”, *Reading Myself and Others*, 167-169.

American Trilogy, a theme which Robert Stone identifies as “the obsessive center”²⁴⁰ of these late narratives, also implicates Zuckerman as an individual capable of exposing secrets because ultimately, it is Zuckerman as the narrator/author that is bringing these secret stories to the attention of others. As Tim Parrish notes “Zuckerman’s reason for being is to find people’s secret spots and expose them.”²⁴¹

Once again the unseemliness of the writer is brought into focus, reminding the reader that a writer is not predisposed towards discretion. The exposure reinforces Tarnopol’s comments on the ethics of writing in *My Life as a Man* where he says “It’s the nature of being a novelist to make private life public—that’s a part of what a novelist is up to” (*MLAM*, 253). Les detects what Zuckerman is up to with his subtly delivered threats. When Zuckerman reveals that he is writing a book Les asks, “What kind of books do you write? Whodunits?” (*HS*, 356) Zuckerman doesn’t shy from the bait that is being cast when he responds, “I write about people like you” (*HS*, 356). Zuckerman, despite feeling threatened, cannot help delving deeper and “peering a little further into his mind” (*HS*, 357). While Les, encased as he is within the stereotype of the Vietnam veteran, does not engage in acts of self-improvisation, in this conversation with Zuckerman he gets to momentarily indulge in masking and disguise. Dropping the disguise just enough to let Zuckerman read his meaning he states:

he looked at me with not too much but with too little opacity in his face, too little deceit, too little duplicity. In his voice there was a chilling resonance [...] A chilling and astonishing resonance that made everything about Coleman’s accident clear.” (*HS*, 358)

Beneath these comments, evasive and opaque though they may be, is the impending threat of violence represented in the auger he holds “right up to [Zuckerman’s] face” (*HS*, 359). Faced with the immediacy of such a threat Zuckerman thinks: “Here. Here was the origin. Here was the essence. Here” (*HS*, 359). Zuckerman’s search for truth will not come without a price and it is here on the frozen over lake that Zuckerman realises that if he ever publishes his book he

²⁴⁰ Robert Stone, “Waiting for Left”, review of *I Married a Communist* by Philip Roth. *The New York Review of Books* 45.17, 5 November 1998. <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/695>> [accessed July 2009].

²⁴¹ Tim Parrish, “Becoming Black: Zuckerman’s Bifurcating Self in *The Human Stain*”, Royal ed., *New Perspectives* (2005), 222.

must leave: "I knew that my five years alone in my house here were over. I knew that if and when I finished the book, I was going to have to go elsewhere to live" (*HS*, 360). So Zuckerman's contact with Les, like his contact with Coleman, brings him out of his seclusion and back into a world that is not solely fiction writing, even though that is what he will eventually transform it into, with the publication of "The Human Stain".

Roth transforms the murderous image of Les into an idyllic scene: "Just facing him, I could feel the terror of the auger—even with him already seated back on his bucket" (*HS*, 360-361) Les's threat to Zuckerman, "[t]he only time a secret gets out, Mr. Zuckerman, is when you tell that secret" (*HS*, 360) is nullified in the vision Roth offers up, "[o]nly rarely, at the end of our century, does life offer up a vision as pure and peaceful as this one: a solitary man on a bucket, fishing through eighteen inches of ice in a lake that's constantly turning over its water atop an arcadian mountain in America" (*HS*, 361). At the novel's end Roth casts Les in a perfectly misanthropic light. The image of Les upon the lake is perceived as a stain or a spot on the landscape, but one that is perfect and not repellent; one that invokes the arcadian and, as Posnock notes, Thoreauvian description on which the novel ends:

[T]he icy white of the lake encircling a tiny spot that was a man, the only human marker in all of nature, like the X of an illiterate's signature on a sheet of paper. There it was, if not the whole story, the whole picture. (*HS*, 361)

Out on the frozen lake, using the metaphor of the natural landscape, Zuckerman provides the reader with a glimpse of the autonomy the key protagonist within this novel has been striving, unsuccessfully, to achieve. Coleman Silk attempts to be "uncategorizable", to inhabit, like the vast stellar skyscape that closes *I Married a Communist*, "the inconceivable: the colossal spectacle of no antagonism" (*IMAC*, 323). The tragedy of *The Human Stain* is that, in order to do this, Coleman feels he must rewrite his identity because the society he exists in will read him only through his skin and not through the unclassifiable, "whole story, whole picture" (*HS*, 361) that constitutes an individual human life.

Chapter Five

“The Wounds of Age”: The Inescapable Corpus of Roth’s Shorter Fiction *The Dying Animal, Everyman, Exit Ghost, and Indignation*

I. Anatomy Lessons: an overview of Roth’s use of corporeality in the representation of narrativised selves

Eakin, in his assessment of corporeal registers of self-identity states that “self, memory, and the body are intimately connected”²⁴² and as a result the “self and memory [...] of (higher) consciousness [is] anchored in the life of the body.”²⁴³ The corporeal self and its relation to narrativised experiences of subjectivity has always held a prominent place in Roth’s writing. The male body, in particular, features strongly in Zuckerman’s late narratives. As we have seen throughout Chapters Three and Four, in the trilogy the protagonists’ urge for self-transformation frequently extends to the corporeal self. However, the corporeal self within these narratives is predominantly portrayed as functioning relatively unproblematically. For Coleman, his corporeal self is perceived by him to be “problematic” only because of the racial identity it imparts. In both *I Married a Communist* and *American Pastoral* it is the protagonists’ spectacular physicality that contributes to the narratives they are provided with (Ira “becoming” Abraham Lincoln, the Swede as a local sports star), or that they ascribe to, which leads to their eventual downfall. Indeed for the most part, their physical selves *over-*perform the impersonations and identities to which they aspire. It is only the characters of Sabbath with his arthritic fingers, Ira, plagued with bodily pains throughout his life, and Zuckerman with his impotency and incontinency, that are presented as experiencing any prolonged form of corporeal pain or diminishment. However, Eakin notes that “the vicissitudes of the body can radically redefine the experience of identity”²⁴⁴ but that this radical redefinition rarely comes to fruition if the body is functioning in a manner that does not problematise the individual’s

²⁴² Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, 19.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

operations in and through that body: “Only when the link between sense of the body and sense of the self is *disrupted* [...] do we grasp its decisive, *normally invisible*, functioning in our lives.”²⁴⁵ (emphasis added)

Roth’s post-trilogy work explicitly turns to explore this corporeal aspect of identity. The rigorous control of identity exercised by the protagonists of the American trilogy has now been replaced by the intrusive reality of the corporeal self, in particular the ageing or ill body. The self-identity of an individual is shown to be increasingly dependent on the ability of the body to actually perform *as a body*. The representation of the disobedient body has enabled Roth to question what happens to our sense of self as the body begins to no longer reflect how we feel or think about the being that we call the self. *The Dying Animal*, *Everyman*, *Exit Ghost* and *Indignation* are united thematically by the fact that their protagonists are met with the confrontation of self-as-body through ageing and/or death. They are each in some way victims of their own corporeality. As Eakin states “every self is damaged, [...] by living in *and as* a mortal body”.²⁴⁶ Before turning to the later fictions and Roth’s “final lesson[s]”²⁴⁷ and meditations on the impact of mortality to an individual’s self-identity, *Novotny’s Pain*, *The Breast*, *The Anatomy Lesson*, *Operation Shylock*, and *Patrimony* will be discussed in order to provide an overview of Roth’s previous engagements with the relationship between corporeality and self-identity.

i) “Ensnared by the selfness of pain”²⁴⁸: “Novotny’s Pain”

In the short story “Novotny’s Pain” (1962) Roth addresses the issue of the narrativised self and its relationship with corporeality through a story that focuses on the concept of undiagnosed bodily pain and the insufficiencies of narrative as a means of explaining or effectively communicating that pain. In the story, a young soldier preparing to be dispatched to the Korean War begins to suffer backache. Although he undergoes medical checks the doctor can find no proper source or explanation for the pain. Novotny tries to explain that the pain “wasn’t on the

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 26.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 42.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Roth, *The Anatomy Lesson* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983) Reprinted in Roth, *Zuckerman Bound*, 10.

surface but deep inside his back”, the doctor responds by telling him “it was deep inside his head”.²⁴⁹ From the onset Novotny’s pain is perceived by those around him as a means of avoiding the war. Novotny’s “pain” is read by others as a narrative he had constructed in order to avoid his duties as an American soldier, a narrative that is *impersonating* pain, as opposed to one that is desperately attempting to convey the message of pain. He is court martialed and eventually dishonourably discharged with a diagnosis of being “passive-aggressive.”²⁵⁰ Novotny’s pain is registered by the army as purely psychological, a phantom born out of his fear of death. The army’s response makes him initially question the reality of his pain, “[h]e wondered if nothing could be wrong with him”²⁵¹, and whether his pain is simply, as the army are claiming, a manifestation of his mind. As Shostak notes “Novotny attempts to reject his bodily consciousness because it conflicts with the discourse that so confidently describes him from the outside.”²⁵² But the privileging of mind over body illustrated in the act of identifying cerebral narratives as more authoritative versions of the self than the narrative of corporeal “pain” does nothing to ease Novotny’s pain. His pain persists in spite of the army’s refusal to recognise it: “That all the doctors were unable to give a satisfactory diagnosis did not make his pain any less real”.²⁵³ Irrespective of the fact that he cannot find a medical root for his pain, that is to say a *narrative* that accurately describes or diagnoses it, Novotny can only ground his reasoning in the very persistence of the *experience* of pain.

Novotny is a young male soldier, and because his “pain” is undiagnosable, because a suitable linguistic formula cannot be sourced that accurately determines it, his narrative is written off as unbecoming or unacceptable behaviour for the identity of American soldier he had heretofore inhabited. The body is perceived as an object that merely contains the cerebral self, and so physical pain that doesn’t have a corresponding diagnosis is regulated to being “all in the mind”, a false narrative relayed by the individual for cowardly or deceptive reasons. Novotny’s narrativised self-identity is, as a result of bodily interjection, failing to comply with his previous experiences of self-identity and consequently with the strict models of

²⁴⁹ Roth, “Novotny’s Pain”, *A Philip Roth Reader* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1981), 270.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 277.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 275.

²⁵² Shostak, *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives*, 42.

²⁵³ Roth, “Novotny’s Pain”, 279.

self-identity governing the regulations of the American army. Shostak locates this crisis of identity as an effort on the part of Roth to “[imply] that the meaningfulness of symptoms is as likely to reside in the social constructs of such an institution as the Army, whose discipline brooks no exception, as in the individual.”²⁵⁴ While it is the case that Novotny, as a subject experiencing backache, no longer complies with the American army’s strictures relating to masculine subjectivity, reading the text in terms of the larger scheme of institutional constructs of identity tends to marginalise the central concern of the story; namely Novotny, and his pain.

Novotny is an individual who can no longer reconcile the narrativised and unspeakable aspects of his identity. Novotny’s experiencing of pain acutely conveys the difficulty of any attempt to reconcile the cerebral to the corporeal once the corporeal has interjected in a way that requires a subsequent re-scripting of the narrativised experience of self-identity; what Eakin refers to as “the vicissitudes of the body [that] can radically redefine the experience of identity”.²⁵⁵ For Novotny the consequence of this “pain” is serious because, as Shostak notes, his position as a soldier does not allow for such pain-instigated re-configurations of identity. He no longer inhabits the narrative that had allowed him to *be* a soldier; a narrative that had all the while been dependent on the “*normally invisible*”²⁵⁶ functioning of the physical body. Novotny’s consolation that “nobody knew anything more about him than he himself did”²⁵⁷ can be interpreted as resignation to this lack of epistemological certainty that surrounds selfhood, in particular pointing to the disturbing effect corporeal interjection has on narrativised understandings and experiences of self-identity. As Roth shows, when something happens to force us to confront or think about the ways in which we perceive the self, our concept is often shown to be fragile and easily susceptible to disintegration. Novotny’s pain cannot be put into words.

ii) “a neck thinking neck-thoughts” (*AL*, 22): *The Anatomy Lesson*

and *Operation Shylock*

²⁵⁴ Shostak, *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives*, 42.

²⁵⁵ Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, 31.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁵⁷ Roth, “Novotny’s Pain”, 279-80.

In *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), Zuckerman is in a similar situation to Novotny as he is felled by a chronic pain he can neither diagnose nor cure. "Zuckerman had lost his subject" (AL, 39) we are told, referring to his subject matter as it relates to his profession as novelist but also to the corporeality that contributes to, and up until the onset of this pain, aided in the continuation of, his self-identity. Zuckerman's sense of his own subjectivity is now subsumed by this corporeal pain; a pain that has no narrative other than the *experience* of pain so that Zuckerman, in losing his sense of self-identity to bodily pain, now conceives of "himself" only in relation to the part of him that hurts: "Had he kept a pain diary, the only entry would have been one word: Myself" (AL, 232). He is "Nothing but a neck thinking neck-thoughts" (AL, 22). From this position of being painfully aware of his physicality, incapacitated by chronic pain Zuckerman finds that he can no longer devote himself to the task of creating consciousness. The consequences of this are two-fold as he is unable to "create consciousness" as an author creates character but also unable to continue the narrativised experiences of subjectivity that sustain his self-identity as an individual. Instead, "he worked now with the same stubborn resolve" which formerly marked his writing habits "to fall back to sleep until noon" (AL, 33). He feels that he is "no longer a novelist" (AL, 40) because now there is "no character imaginable other than the one in pain" (AL, 232). Physically he is becoming unrecognisable to himself: "In the full-length mirror on his bathroom door, he saw at the start of each day a skinny old man holding Nathan's pajamas: denuded scalp, fleshy hips, bony frame, softening belly" (AL, 33).

The privilege of prioritising a narrativised self-identity that is predominantly cerebral in that it is a linguistic configuration that conveys a linguistic experience or understanding of subjectivity is one Zuckerman can no longer afford as his body has made a painful intrusion; an intrusion that brings the corporeal physicality of his existence into the frame. Like Novotny, Zuckerman, to no avail, seeks a diagnosis for his pain and he is met with a similar supposition; that his pain is "self-inflicted" (AL, 34) because it cannot be diagnosed, it cannot be narrativised and thus made correlative with a narrativised experience of subjectivity. His psychoanalyst proposes that the pain is "penance for the popularity of *Carnovsky*," (AL, 34) suggesting that Zuckerman has taken pain

“back to its root, in *poena* the Latin word for punishment” (AL, 34). “*Carnovsky*” was the work that brought Zuckerman fame and subsequently disgraced his family as the public took the family portrait to be an untransformed, contractually “autobiographical” rendering of his actual family. According to Zuckerman’s brother the novel “had precipitated their father’s fatal coronary” (AL, 40). But while the deaths of his parents loom large in his imagination, Zuckerman admits that he “wasn’t buying it. His conscience wasn’t that unconscious. Wasn’t that conventional” (AL, 35). He refuses to grant his pain symbolic meaning because for Zuckerman, the experience of this pain *cannot* be narrativised:

They want to give it *significance*. What does it mean? What are you hiding? What are you showing? What are you betraying? It’s impossible to just suffer the pain. You have to suffer its meaning. But it’s not interesting and it has no meaning—it’s just plain stupid pain (AL, 200).

What Zuckerman chooses instead is to seek solace not in resignation to his conscience but in self-transformation. “I want a second life. It’s as ordinary as that” (AL, 195) he tells his friend Bobby Freytag. In search of this second life Zuckerman decides to give up the writing profession and begin life anew as a medical student; an individual whose profession it is to diagnose ailments of the corporeal self, to allocate narratives that best describe conditions located within the body. When Bobby, an anaesthesiologist, tries to discourage him, telling him to at least choose an easier profession, Zuckerman explains that it is the idea of the patient being other than himself that intrigues him. Writing, according to Zuckerman, is “*all* limits. Bound to a subject. Bound to make sense of it. Bound to make a book of it” (AL, 203). He declares that he is done with self-examination and “raiding [his] memory and feeding on the past” (AL, 204). “I can’t take anymore of my inner life,” he tells Bobby, “Subjectivity’s the subject, and I’ve had it” (AL, 196). Instead he wants “the real thing, the thing in the raw, and not for the writing but for itself” (AL, 204).

Zuckerman’s groping towards this second life quickly descends into the comic. In Chicago, unable to resist the natural urge towards improvisation, he indulges in an act of impersonation presenting himself as a pornographer and using the name of Milton Appel, a literary critic and Zuckerman’s arch-nemesis. “I’m Milton Appel” he declares “Rhymes with ‘lapel’ like in zoot suit” (AL, 191). This impersonation is an attempt to divorce himself “from the flesh and its incessant

wailing” (AL, 232). As with his decision to become a doctor, through it he hopes to “once and for all dissolve that misalliance and resume life as [his] own man” (AL, 232). He, thus, also tries to impersonate a healthy man, keeping his pain hidden: “No more to be done for my pain. No more to be said” (AL, 198); “He’d made up his mind and that was that. *I am well*” (AL, 201). Roth shows, however, the futility of such thinking as while in Chicago Zuckerman’s pain still persists and he spends his time doped up on alcohol and painkillers. Such anodynes result only in a temporary “killing” or numbing of the pain he is experiencing, the non-linguistic narrative his body is communicating. Towards the end of the novel when he brings Bobby’s father to visit his wife’s grave, Zuckerman attacks the old man because he can no longer listen to his grieving as it complicates his feeling towards his dead father. Zuckerman lunging for the old man merely injures himself instead as he falls over and smashes his jaw off a graveside, a telling reminder of his mortality.

The novel ends with Zuckerman hospitalised and almost completely immobilised: “He couldn’t move his head at all. Imprisonment complete” (AL, 265). Having broken his jaw he loses his ability to speak and he is now no longer the speech that emanates from the organ of the mouth but the organ itself: “Your mouth is who you are” (AL, 278). Zuckerman is still convinced that he can exchange “his fanatical devotion to sitting at a typewriter alone in a room” for the “urgent, immediate, human exchange” of the doctor/patient relationship (AL, 291). The novel ends with him roaming the corridors of the hospital “as though he still believed that he could unchain himself from a future as a man apart and escape the corpus that was his” (AL, 291). The final line seems to point to the naïvete of Zuckerman’s plan. With “corpus” referring both to Zuckerman’s body of work and his corporeal self, it infers that Zuckerman will remain bounded to his profession as long as he continues to *be* a body. Both of his corpora are thus inescapable, and Zuckerman’s self-identity, as an identity that is narrative dependent, must respond to the demands of the body; a lesson which Zuckerman in *The Anatomy Lesson*, painfully, has had to learn.

Roth is interested in breaking down binary and dualistic assumptions about identity and his exploration of physical pain throughout his career test the limits of this thinking. Roth has stressed that his interest in chronic pain is not born on the symbolic level. “The trouble with pains,” Roth suggests, “is that they don’t feel symbolic” (RMAO, 114). Furthermore, “[n]ot knowing the source of one’s pain

doesn't make it symbolic: it just makes it hurt more" (*RMAO*, 114) because the subject, as an individual whose self-identity is sustained through narrative, is unable to locate, communicate, or make communicable, the experience of the pain. This is a fitting summation of Novotny's situation and a topic Roth further explores in *Operation Shylock* through the depiction of "Philip's" physical and mental breakdown. As discussed in Chapter Two, the breakdown "Philip" suffers is finally attributed to sleeping pills, but in the aftermath of this discovery he displays a reluctance to fully believe that it was these pills which triggered the disintegration. This reluctance echoes Novotny's doubt in "Novotny's Pain." Just as Novotny wondered if "nothing could be wrong with him",²⁵⁸ the "Philip" of *Operation Shylock* states: "I privately remained half-convinced that, though the drug perhaps intensified my collapse, it was I who had made the worst happen" (*OS*, 26-27). Yet simultaneously, he states this "mental coming apart was as distinctly physical a reality as a tooth being pulled, and the agony of it was excruciating" (*OS*, 20). The agony of such a pain, cannot be adequately expressed through the narratives these identities, as identities sustained by the act of self-narrativisation, employ on a daily basis.

Operation Shylock conveys the loss of a sense of self in the wake of this breakdown that leaves "Philip" asking "Where is Philip Roth?" (*OS*, 22). "Philip" explains that he was not speaking "histrionically" (*OS*, 22) but rather asked this question because he was completely unrecognisable to himself. The changes wrought on "Philip's" body by the breakdown render his body as something other than the self previously recognisable to "Philip" as his own identity. These changes alter "Philip's" body so that the narrativised constructions of self-identity he had previously inhabited no longer correlate to the corporeal self he finds himself contained in: "When I reached into my pillbox [...] I couldn't believe (though I had no choice but to believe) that the fingers trembling in the pillbox were mine" (*OS*, 22). His physical behaviour, a behaviour that prior to this event had not problematized his narrativised self-identity, is altered and replaced by repetitive gestures that further destabilise his sense of self:

I could not forget my shirtsleeves for two minutes at a time. I couldn't seem to prevent myself from feverishly rolling up my shirtsleeves and then rolling

²⁵⁸ Roth, "Novotny's Pain", 275.

them down just as feverishly and meticulously buttoning the cuff, only immediately to unbutton the cuff and begin the meaningless procedure once more, as though its meaning went, in fact, to the core of my existence. (*OS*, 21)

“Philip” recalls how the breakdown had interrupted his ecological sense of self, his physical place in his surroundings.²⁵⁹ His daily routines, his interaction with his environment and the routines of the body, the routines, or repeated narratives, through which he knows and sustains himself were also changed or broken. For example, he could no longer swim in the pool where he had swum in for “summers on end” (*OS*, 22). Now, he was “fearful of even putting in a toe, overwhelmed by the pretty, summery surface sheen of those thousands of gallons of water in which [he] was sure to be sucked under for good” (*OS*, 22). His home, which he had always considered a sanctuary, “had suddenly become a hideous asylum” (*OS*, 19). Enveloped in the disaster of self-abandonment” (*OS*, 22) Philip likens the breakdown to a “usurping self” (*OS*, 29), or the laying bare of his “inmost being” in “all its sickly puniness” (*OS*, 21). The breakdown of self is significantly described as physical torment not solely as emotional and mental upheaval. “Dragging the bad leg,” “Philip” recalls how he lived each night as if he was “on the way to a torture session” he couldn’t survive (*OS*, 21).

iii) *The Breast*

In *The Breast* (1972) Roth engages with the concept of bodily confinement not through an exploration of chronic pain, but through extreme physical metamorphosis. In this short work David Kepesh finds himself contained within a radically transformed physical body. The only aspects of his previous “self” that remain are his command of language and his pre-existent narrativised sense of self-identity, one that related to, and was reliant upon, his human corporeality. He is now “a female mammary gland disconnected from any human form [...] weighing one hundred and fifty-five pounds [...] and measuring, still, six feet in length.”²⁶⁰ According to Roth the struggle to be “not simply that shape and those dimensions,

²⁵⁹ The ecological self is defined by Ulric Neisser as “the self as perceived with respect to the physical environment; I am the person here in this place, engaged in this particular activity”. Quoted in Eakin *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, 22.

²⁶⁰ Roth, *The Breast* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972; New York: Vintage, 1994). 13.

but simultaneously to be something *other*, constitutes the entire action of the book.”²⁶¹ Roth’s indebtedness to Kafka and Gogol in *The Breast* is one that he makes clear in the text itself as Kepesh at one point attempts to locate the origin of his transformation in the literature he has been reading and teaching:

The books I’ve been teaching—they put the idea in my head. I’m thinking of my European Literature course. Teaching Gogol and Kafka every year—teaching ‘The Nose’ and ‘The Metamorphosis.’ (*TB*, 60)

For Roth it is “fitting” that Kepesh should do so as his protagonists, being largely bookish in character, frequently attempt to understand the self by way of literature. Speaking on *The Breast* he states, “I thought it was fitting for a serious, dedicated literature professor to think of Gogol and Kafka when his own horrible transformation occurs” (*RMAO*, 58).

The Breast is nearer to Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* than it is to Gogol’s “The Nose” as Roth, like Kafka, sets his protagonist’s transformation in the “real” and not an altered state of reality. As Anne Margaret Daniel notes “the metamorphosis [in *The Breast*] gets its power from the humorous proximity of the very commonplace and the entirely bizarre.”²⁶² In “The Metamorphosis” Gregor Samsa is in no doubt that it is the “real” and not the dream world he inhabits. His nightmare begins, we are told, after he awakens from a “troubled dream.”²⁶³ Kafka makes the nature of this transformed existence clear to the reader: “It was no dream”.²⁶⁴ In *The Breast* Roth similarly makes it clear that he is not presenting us with a fantastical tale and suggests that he falls somewhere between these two writers with regards to “what sort of claim to make on the reader’s credulity” (*RMAO*, 57). In contrast to Kafka’s tale, the question of doubt as to the reality of the transformation is problematised by Kepesh himself. Unlike Gregor Samsa, Kepesh refutes the logic of his situation and vocalises disbelief at his nightmarish transformation. He is willing to believe that he has gone insane, “I’m not a breast! I’m mad!”, and in this veers closer to Gogol’s Kovalev. Roth, however, has said that in contrast to “The Nose”, Kepesh’s crisis in *The Breast* isn’t played out at the expense of the reader where Gogol “keeps alive and unresolved the question of the

²⁶¹ Roth, “On The Breast”, *Reading Myself and Others*, 63.

²⁶² Anne Margaret Daniel, “Philip Roth, MVP: *Our Gang*, *The Breast* and *The Great American Novel*”, Royal ed., *New Perspectives* (2005), 64.

²⁶³ Franz Kafka, “Metamorphosis”, *Metamorphosis and Other Stories* (London: Penguin, 2000), 76

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.

story's 'reality'" (*RMAO*, 58). In *The Breast*, however, Kepesh's doubts as to the "reality" of his situation are firmly his own.

When Kepesh recovers consciousness and wakes to find himself utterly transformed, he despairingly calls out: "My face? Where is it! Where are my arms! My legs! Where is my mouth!" (*TB*, 17). Although Kepesh remains a corporeal entity, "My body was still a body" (*TB*, 67), the physical reality of self-as-breast remains at odds with his interior narrativised sense of self-identity; a narrativised sense of self that had been drawn from, and was consequently reliant upon, the corporeal, *human*, form that he had previously inhabited. Kepesh's pronouncement of his new corporeality is not cognitively registered because he still scripts his understanding and experience of subjectivity in terms of his former, physical, self. He still thinks he speaks from a mouth and that he has a face. Kepesh's interior self-narrative, the narrative through which he understands his subjectivity, is struggling to register the full implications of his corporeal metamorphosis. While his voice now emanates from somewhere in his midsection, his "internal landscape doggedly continues to associate the higher functions of consciousness with the body's topmost point" (*TB*, 15). Kepesh arrives somewhat traumatically upon the discovery that the possession of a body image, as Eakin suggests "anchors and sustains our sense of identity".²⁶⁵

Initially Kepesh experiences a sense of disembodiment, "what am I?", and attributes the disappearance of a recognisable body to "a severe mental breakdown." (*TB*, 68) "I'm not a breast! I'm mad!" (*TB*, 69) he shouts. Yet his protestations cannot alter the fact of his new physicality and eventually Kepesh begins to grapple with the contours of his transformed corporeal identity. In discussing *The Breast* Roth has compared Kepesh's struggle with that of Descartes at the beginning of the *Meditations*: "I am certain that I am, but what am I? What is there that can be esteemed true?"²⁶⁶ "What am I? [...] Tell me the truth?" (*TB*, 68) Kepesh cries from his hospital bed. But the Cartesian model of identity as entirely cerebral is evoked in the text only to be undermined by the fact that whatever else he may be, he is ultimately still a female breast. Kepesh's yearning to retain a sense of self that is continuous with the self he was *before* the transformation is continually interrupted by his transformed exterior. Kepesh cannot relinquish the

²⁶⁵ Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, 11.

²⁶⁶ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Quoted in Roth, *Reading Myself and Others*, 61.

idea of an inherent sense of self that is *not* breast. He clings desperately to the narratives that constituted his self-identity *before* he turned into a breast: "I must [...] continue to be me. For if not me, who? Or what? Either I continue to be myself or I go mad—and then I die" (*TB*, 23).

According to Roth "what he's [Kepesh] become has narrowed his life down to a single issue: his anatomy" (*RMAO*, 63). In spite of this anatomy, which clearly isn't male, Kepesh still strives for self-definition through the social and gendered constructs of masculinity and consequently to the physical assertion of male sexual desire through male genitalia. He re-appropriates his nipple, making it stand in for his no longer existent penis. In doing so Kepesh re-writes his corporeal self by re-appropriating his physical form in order to script a physical identity that better reflects his sense of his own subjectivity as male. Kepesh improvises upon the undeniably female form of his physical body so that the nipple now impersonates a penis; the physical female is improvised through self-narrative in order to be reconfigured as physical male. With this transformed phallus he wishes to give full reign to his desires and becomes increasingly lewd with the female nurse who tends to him. Conversely, Kepesh's sense of himself as male, in particular as heterosexual male, is so integral to the narrativised self-identity sustaining him that he refuses to allow himself to take pleasure when he is being cared for by a male nurse. Even though he "realises the conjunction of male mouth and female nipple can hardly be described as a homosexual act" (*TB*, 45), the "power of his past and its taboos" (*TB*, 45) curtail his desire. Roth draws attention to the absurd nature of Kepesh's logic by noting that the means by which he defines himself as a man are utterly discounted "by the fact that he *isn't* one any longer" (*RMAO*, 63). Kepesh's sense of self is appropriated within the parameters of male subjectivity, "for who but a man has conscience, reason, desire and remorse?" (*TB*, 41) The reader of *The Breast*, however, may simultaneously ask, how can "a female mammary gland disconnected from any human form" (*TB*, 13) be a man?

The pleasure Kepesh takes in his transformed state further destabilises his sense of self:

What alarmed me wasn't the strangeness of my desires [...] but the degree to which I would be severing myself from my own past—and kind—by surrendering to them. I was afraid that the further I went the further I would go—that I would reach a point of frenzy from which I would pass over into a

state of being that had no longer anything to do with who or what I once had been. It wasn't that I would no longer be myself—I would no longer be anyone. (*TB*, 43)

So as to prevent himself from becoming “craving flesh and nothing more” (*TB*, 44), to prevent his sense of his own identity reconfiguring into those of a breast, Kepesh imposes limits and restraints on his desire. To accept the frenzy of desire and indulge in it would be to lose the part of him that he considers to be human and thus to belong to his previous physical body. But like Zuckerman in the *Anatomy Lesson*, Kepesh must learn that he cannot escape the body he is encased in. The ability to escape the self through impersonation, as many of Roth's characters do, is severely restricted by the dimensions of his new body.

For Kepesh the only way he can refashion himself is through exhibitionism, which here, as Debra Shostak states, is “a fantasy of escape that exploits voyeurism”.²⁶⁷ Kepesh hopes his extreme transformation will bring him fame, renown, and of course, women. “I am the Breast,” he declares, “and will live by my own lights!” (*TB*, 86). But Kepesh's exhibitionism depends on an audience and he is somewhat dismayed when Dr. Klinger informs him that his case has been treated with the utmost discretion, and if the news of his transformation has been leaked, people will tend not to believe it anyway (*TB*, 86-87). “[Y]ou will never be taken on your own terms” (*TB*, 88) Klinger informs him. It is Kepesh's fate to confront precisely what those terms are in relation to his identity within this newly transformed body.

iv) *Patrimony*

The previous texts deal with bodily transformation that is unexpected or premature. With *Patrimony* Roth begins to explore the ageing body and age related illness. With the exception of *Indignation*, the ageing body is the central theme of the novels discussed throughout the remainder of this chapter. As discussed in Chapter One, *Patrimony* conveys the final months of Herman Roth's life when the brain tumour that is slowly killing him begins to make his body unrecognisable and unknowable to both Herman himself and to Philip Roth, his son. In the opening pages of *Patrimony*, Roth describes his father's facial disfiguration, a facial

²⁶⁷ Shostak, *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives*, 33.

paralysis which prior to the discovery of the brain tumour, was believed to be a result of Bell's palsy. Roth details how his father woke up to discover that "half his face was no longer his. What had looked like him the day before now looked like nobody" (*PTS*, 10). Roth describes his father's hapless attempts to reconstruct his face: "With his hand he pushed the right cheek back to where it had been the night before, holding it there for the count of ten" (*PTS*, 10). Irrespective of how many times he attempted to realign his physical self to the one he had previously inhabited, his face remained unfamiliar and unlike the self he had known before. *Patrimony* charts this deterioration of the body, aligning it not only with Herman's loss of self but also with Roth's loss of a knowable sense of his father. The reconstructive narrative of *Patrimony* attempts to restore that knowledge by effectively giving his father back his face through narrative.

This reconstruction, however, is never far from the looming prospect of death. While Roth re-creates the father of his youth, he must inevitably return to the slowly disintegrating form of his father, who now appears to be "little more than a shrunken thing with a crushed face" (*PTS*, 167). In the weeks preceding Herman's death, in an effort to delay this disappearance, Roth juxtaposes the present image of his father with a photograph of a thirty-six-year-old Herman posing robustly with his two sons, "one Roth directly behind the other" (*PTS*, 230). Roth describes the difficulty he had in trying to connect the father represented in the photo with the one he found before him: "Trying with all my mental strength to join the two fathers and make them one was a bewildering, even hellish job" (*PTS*, 231). The narrative of *Patrimony* is Roth's attempt to bridge this gap. Recreating Herman in narrative not only makes him visible to his son but also secures for the son a stability of self that was threatened by the unrecognisable body of his father. The remainder of this chapter will focus on the shorter fictions that followed the American trilogy and examine Roth's unwavering representation of ageing or ill subjects bound for, and by, their recognition of their own mortality and their proximity to death.

II. *The Dying Animal*

i) "I am the Breast" (*TB*, 86): Kepesh and Consuela

The Dying Animal opens with the epigraph: "The body contains the life story just as much as the brain."²⁶⁸ This quote from Edna O'Brien stresses the importance of body in relation to concepts of self-identity and self-re/presentation. It is a realignment which Eakin, in his exploration of corporeal identity *as* self, seeks to make central to his theories on autobiography. Crucial to these registers of self is the awareness of how living "in and as bodies profoundly shape"²⁶⁹ our sense and awareness of self-identity. In *The Dying Animal*, Roth returns to the character of David Kepesh and the theme of embodiment explored throughout *The Breast*. Here, however, the only metamorphosis in question is the gradual physical change brought about by ageing. Roth shows that the process, however natural, can be just as disconcerting, as Kepesh's sense of self begins to unravel when he meets and falls in love with a much younger woman, Consuela Castillo. Roth weaves a short but conceptually complex narrative around the themes of beauty, youth, illness, ageing, and death. The title, taken from Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium", initially posits Kepesh as the referent, as the "dying animal", but as the narrative unfolds this extends to include Consuela who is diagnosed with breast cancer. Both figures thus embody, in different ways, the metaphorical concept of a "dying animal." The breast, the conceit which marked Kepesh's transformation in *The Breast* comes to symbolise both desire and death as Kepesh confronts the mortality of the flesh, and the reality that the subject is destined to die and disappear.

"Can you imagine old age?" (*TDA*, 35) Kepesh asks his silent interlocutor as he narrates the story of his doomed love affair with Consuela; an affair that took place eight years ago when she was twenty-four and he was sixty-two. Now seventy, Kepesh confesses that he "had no idea what it was like. Not even a false image—no image" (*TDA*, 35). The narrative is filtered entirely through Kepesh's perspective and is a stark insight into male desire through a subjectivity that relentlessly, and unapologetically, objectifies his young lover. As David Lodge

²⁶⁸ Roth, *The Dying Animal*, (London: Vintage, 2001), epigraph.

²⁶⁹ Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, xi

notes the “the time scheme of the book is very complex, for it operates on two planes simultaneously, which converge only on the penultimate page.”²⁷⁰ Kepesh narrates the story of the affair in the “real time” of the text but as Lodge notes he “sometimes uses the rhetorical device of the ‘historic present’ on the other plane to give special immediacy to some evocation of the past”.²⁷¹ The effect gives the affair and its impact on Kepesh a pressing immediacy, bridging the gap between the affair’s dissolution and Consuela’s return. While the reader familiar with both *The Breast* and *The Professor of Desire* (1977) should be somewhat attuned to Kepesh’s voice, Roth pushes the boundaries of propriety here, as his did in *Sabbath’s Theater*, by unapologetically covering the taboo of desire and the ageing subject.

Kepesh is no longer trying to appease the warring principles of desire and restraint as he was in *The Professor of Desire*. Now he has reached a certain position of respectability as a cultural critic and seems to epitomise a calculating rationality when it comes to his sexual encounters. When he first meets Consuela in the seminar he teaches on Practical Criticism, he singles her out as another student to conduct an end of year affair with. However, his rational approach to seduction begins to give way as Consuela’s youth and beauty make him painfully aware of his own diminishing body. “[W]hat do you do” he asks “if you’re sixty-two and believe you’ll never have a claim on something so perfect again?” (*TDA*, 33):

What do you do if you’re sixty-two and you realize all those bodily parts invisible up to now (kidneys, lungs, veins, arteries, brains, intestines, heart) are about to start making themselves distressingly apparent while the organ most conspicuous throughout your life is doomed to dwindle into insignificance? (*TDA*, 34)

Consuela puts Kepesh in sight of his own corporeal mortality. To stave off the dwindling insignificance brought about by ageing he continues to proceed along rational lines, shamelessly objectifying her and disavowing her subjectivity. She is “a work of art, classical art, beauty in its classical form” (*TDA*, 46). “Men have always been her mirror” (*TDA*, 46) he states. He proceeds into the relationship

²⁷⁰ David Lodge, “Sick with Desire”, review of *The Dying Animal* by Philip Roth. *The New York Review of Books* 48.11, 5 July 2001. < <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/14311> > [accessed July 2009].

²⁷¹ Ibid.

actively performing the role of cultural critic, “reading” her as he would a work of art:

I had pronounced her a great work of art, with all the magical influence of a great work of art. Not the artist but the art itself. There was nothing for her to understand—she had only to be there, on view, and the understanding of her importance flowed from me. It was not required of her, any more than it is of a violin concerto, or the moon, that she may have any sort of self-conception. That’s what I was for: I was Consuela’s awareness of herself. (*TDA*, 38)

Such blatant objectification is unlikely to endear Kepesh to the reader. For Linda Grant, *The Dying Animal* confirms that “it has by now become apparent to many of Roth’s ardent admirers, both male and female [...] that there is in him a dark distaste for women, a repugnance that can only be described by the word misogyny”.²⁷² Roth certainly refuses to sugar-coat his topic but mistaking the character’s misogyny for the author’s is reductive criticism that detracts from the complexity and serious thematic concerns of the novel. While Grant counts herself among Roth’s “ardent admirers”, “I am a big cheerleader” she states, her willingness to characterise Roth as a misogynist and then to reconcile this with her admiration does little to amend her reductive approach. Referring to the representation of women in the novel, Grant claims that for “Roth, women are always the art, never the artist”.²⁷³ Grant’s use of Roth’s name here instead of Kepesh’s conveys her shortsighted approach. Grant’s assessment of the novel can be said to recall Irving Howe’s infamous and flawed reconsideration of Roth in which he targeted Roth’s use of the first-person narrator: “There usually follows in such first-person narratives a spilling-out of the narrator which it becomes hard to suppose is not also a spilling-out of the author.”²⁷⁴ David Lodge provides a much more nuanced reading of the *The Dying Animal* when he suggests that the mastery of the novel lies in the way it “challenges the reader at every point to define and defend his own ethical position toward the issues raised by the story.”²⁷⁵

Kepesh is undoubtedly portrayed as shrewd, narcissistic, and perpetually unpleasant. In the novel, Kepesh, as Michiko Kakutani observes, “has become a mere shadow of himself. His personal history has been reduced to the bare bones

²⁷² Linda Grant, “Breast Man”, review of *The Dying Animal* by Philip Roth. *The Guardian*, 30 June 2001 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2001/jun/30/fiction.philiproth>> [accessed July 2009].

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Irving Howe, “Philip Roth Reconsidered”, *Commentary*.

²⁷⁵ Lodge, “Sick with Desire”, *The New York Review of Books*.

of sexual appetite and perpetual dissatisfaction”.²⁷⁶ Roth strips Kepesh back to “bare bones of sexual appetite” in order to render more powerfully the anxiety experienced by the ageing male subject. Roth is thus unsparing in his portrayal of Kepesh allowing him to indulge in gross demonstrations of male potency, and chauvinistic inanities in order to expose the self-delusion that lies in his assertion that he is “Consuela’s awareness of herself” (*TDA*, 38). This becomes strikingly apparent when Consuela almost violently displays her subjectivity in a pivotal scene in the novel. Following an aggressive act of fellatio in which Kepesh pins Consuela down and wraps her hair around his fist “like the reins that fasten to the bit of a bridle” (*TDA*, 30), Consuela snaps her teeth at him: “Suddenly. Cruelly. [...] As though she was saying, That’s what I could have done, that’s what I wanted to do, and that’s what I didn’t do” (*TDA*, 31). The bite or the “biting back of life” (*TDA*, 30) frees Consuela from the contained classical beauty, the “narcissism, [...] exhibitionism” (*TDA*, 31) that marked the nature of her sexual relationship with Kepesh and subsequently destabilises Kepesh’s dominance with its clear threat of castration.

The absolute objectification of Consuela that Kepesh indulges in is merely a means of keeping his loss of virility, and his fear of that loss, at bay. If Kepesh can relegate her to the sole position of object he can retain a secure sense of subjectivity. But even he realises that desire is not so easily ordered. “It’s not fifty-fifty like a business transaction. It’s the chaos of eros we’re talking about, the radical destabilization that is its excitement” (*TDA*, 20). Within this it “isn’t that the dominance is being traded sequentially; it’s being traded continuously” (*TDA*, 33). This destabilisation, however, completely undoes Kepesh’s rationality and he begins to lose his previously ordered, rational self to paranoia, jealousy, and anxiety.

Kepesh begins to live in perpetual fear of losing Consuela. In *The Professor of Desire* what he feared was the waning of desire. Here, however, it is the loss of Consuela that haunts him as he becomes convinced that she will leave him for a

²⁷⁶ Michiko Kakutani, “A Man Adrift, Living on Sexual Memories”, Books of the Times; Review of *The Dying Animal* by Philip Roth, *The New York Times*, 8 May 2001.
 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/05/08/books/books-of-the-times-a-man-adrift-living-on-sexual-memories.html?n=Top%2fFeatures%2fBooks%2fBook%20Reviews>> [accessed August 2009].

younger man. And so he arrives at “The pornography of jealousy”:

The jealousy. *That* poison. And unprovoked [...] with these obsessional love affairs you are not your own confident self, not when you’re in the vortex of them and not when the girl is almost a third your age. I feel anxious unless I speak to her on the phone everyday and then I feel anxious after I’ve spoken to her. (TDA, 38)

Kepesh can no longer enjoy his beguilement because he cannot stop fearing that she will leave him for someone else, “all I did was think—think, worry and yes, suffer” he says (THD, 23). Because of his age he cannot believe that Consuela looks upon him with desire. While she may tell him that she adores him she cannot, thinks Kepesh, “bring herself to whisper ‘I desire you’” (THD, 23). Consuela makes Kepesh acutely aware that he is “no longer in the stage of his life when I thought I could do everything” (THD, 39). She makes him grieve for this former self: “now isn’t then, and it’ll never be calm, it’ll never be peaceful” (THD, 40). This gives rise to his own destruction: “The pornography of one’s own destruction” is brought about by what Kepesh terms “The wound of age” (THD, 41). In *The Dying Animal* Kepesh is enchanted by the figure of Consuela as an object of beauty, but one that throws his “wounded” self into sharp contrast: “I am rapt, I am enthralled, and yet I am enthralled outside the frame. What is it that puts me outside? It is age” (TDA, 41). In contrast with his appearances in the earlier novels, the act of ageing for Kepesh decidedly posits him “outside the frame. What is it that puts me outside? It is age” (THD, 41). The wound of age guarantees that he brings about his own destruction as it is the barrier to the sexual dominance he seeks and has sought in both *The Breast* and *The Professor of Desire*. Kepesh seems to have resolved the dilemma of his earlier years where he was pulled between license and restraint. Now he seems to know precisely what he wants, but due to his ageing body he has lost the self-confidence to actually enjoy it: “With Consuela as with no one else, the siphoning off of confidence was almost instantaneous” (THD, 27). “Where’s the fulfilment and the sense of possession?” he asks, “If you have her, why can’t you have her? You’re not getting what you want even when you’re getting what you want” (TDA, 39).

Eventually Kepesh’s paranoid and irrational behaviour brings about the demise of the relationship as, in an act of self-sabotage, Kepesh fails to appear at

Consuela's graduation party. Consuela, in response, cuts off contact with him. The break up leaves Kepesh despondent and he retreats into isolation. Eight years later she shows up at his apartment only to reveal that she has been diagnosed with breast cancer. With this revelation the spell of eroticism is broken as Kepesh can no longer think of going to bed with her. "[T]he erotic power of Consuela's body—well that is over" (*TDA*, 142) he confesses and concedes that he would not have been able to sustain an erection if they had slept together. Kepesh is now faced with the cruelly corporeal mortality of Consuela's body and the fear that the cancer will make her other to herself—"that won't be my body, that won't be anything" (*TDA*, 132). This fear is something that Kepesh has been experiencing all along in relation to his own ageing body. However, while Kepesh's "wound" is sequentially progressive (a progression that is itself reflected in Kepesh's appearances throughout the trajectory of the three Kepesh novels) and to a certain extent in line with Kepeshian narcissism, Consuela's wound will manifest itself in a physical scar that is actual, definite, and cruelly immediate. Kepesh states "[s]he too is now dying" (*TDA*, 128) and "now knows the wound of age." (*TDA*, 148) Illness has broken:

[the] metronomic illusion, the comforting thought that, tick tock, everything happens in its proper time [...] Her sense of time is now the same as mine, speeded up and more forlorn even than mine. (*TDA*, 148)

The switch in fortunes is somewhat disturbing, as according to Kepesh, Consuela is now in the unnatural position of being able to "imagine" old age. Ironically she has become Kepesh's mirror and pointedly reflects his own fears about dying as she is now more poignantly the dying animal of Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium".

The speaker of that poem says "Consume my heart away; sick with desire / And fastened to a dying animal / It knows not what it is"²⁷⁷. Yeats shows how it is the mind and not the body that conceptualises death; it is the mind that narrativises an understanding of "death." In his poem "Death" where Yeats also evokes the image of the dying animal "Nor dread nor hope attend/ A dying animal"²⁷⁸ because "Man has created death".²⁷⁹ Here Yeats makes a significant distinction between the

²⁷⁷ W.B. Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium", *W.B. Yeats: The Poems*, Daniel Albright ed., (London: Everyman, 1994), III, lines 5-6, 240.

²⁷⁸ Yeats, "Death", *W.B. Yeats: The Poems*, lines 1-2, 284.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, line 12.

cerebral and physical concept of death. The “dying animal” feels neither dread nor fear nor death because death is a word alien to physicality; death is a concept created cerebrally and linguistically by man. Yeats can offer escapism in or through art. Kepesh too looked to the aesthetic, in the shape of the perfected body of Consuela, to transcend his own mortality. To desire Consuela now is precisely to be “fastened to a dying animal”. The extent to which Kepesh registers this is conveyed in the mental associations he now makes when he thinks of her. While once she had been the woman in Modigliani’s *Reclining Nude* now she is the hunk of butchered meat that appears in Stanley Spencer’s nude portrait of Spencer and his wife. Kepesh states: “Every time I think of Consuela, I envision that raw leg of lamb shaped like a primitive club beside the blatantly exhibited bodies of Spencer and his wife” (*TDA*, 143) The “butchered hunk of meat” that has “nothing in common with a living lamb” (*TDA*, 144) anticipates the mutilation of Consuela’s cancerous breast. The breast, which once marked the site of life and desire, is now the site of decay, leaving Kepesh impotent in its presence. Having no object through which to define himself Kepesh is left, like Consuela, to realise that eventually his body “won’t be anything” (*TDA*, 132). Unable to sustain the self through the enactment of desire, Kepesh, like Stanley’s butchered lamb, will bear no relation to himself. The self without the recognisable body “knows not what it is”.²⁸⁰

III. *Everyman*

i) “O Deth, thou comest whan I had the[e] leest in mynde!”²⁸¹

“*The Life and Death of a Male Body*”—this, Roth’s *Everyman* concludes, would be the title of his autobiography should he ever write one (*E*, 52) and this is effectively what the short novel charts. The book expands on the theme of mortality explored in *The Dying Animal*, taking the protagonist out of the drama of desire and into the barren territory of old age where he is simply waiting to die.

²⁸⁰ Yeats, “Sailing to Byzantium”, *W.B. Yeats: The Poems*, III, 6, 240.

²⁸¹ Anon., “Everyman”, *Medieval Drama: An Anthology*, Greg Walker ed., (Malden, Mass.; Oxford : Blackwell Publishers, 2000.), 284.

Roth comes to relate what happens when the ageing body begins to betray one's narrativised sense of self-identity, an identity that had been scripted upon a youthful, operable, physical self. The aged corporeal self is rejected by the individual's sense of their own self-identity and thus becomes alien or other to that individual. Ageing is explored as a complete loss of identity, one that de-stabilises the pre-existent sense of self and leaves the subject "looking hungrily back at the superabundant past" (*E*, 102) in which they recognised their body as coherent or analogous to their identifiable self. For Roth's *Everyman*, a sense of nothingness begins to lurk over his everyday existence. The discovery that "you are born to live and you die instead" (*E*, 103) leaves him with a sense of nihilism: "suddenly he was lost in nothing, in the sound of the two syllables 'nothing' no less than in the nothingness, lost and drifting and the dread began to seep in" (*E*, 103).

The text begins at *Everyman*'s burial and moves in a circular trajectory ending with the moment of death which invariably brings the reader back to his burial. This looped narrative reflects the life cycle which *Everyman* is resigned to from the moment of birth. *Everyman* arrives at an awareness of this at a very young age. From the onset he is death haunted and troubled with various illnesses. His first encounter with death occurs when a drowned body is washed up onto the shore near where he is holidaying with his family. The image of the body edging towards the beach terrifies him and is reiterated when, as a young boy, he is admitted to hospital for the first time. His stay in the hospital heightens his acute awareness of death. When he awakes in the morning to discover that the boy next to him is gone, the narrator states that "Nothing could have been made clearer what had happened than the sight of the bare mattress ticking and the uncovered pillows piled in the middle of the empty bed" (*E*, 27). The next time *Everyman* returns to the hospital he is thirty-four and undergoing surgery for the removal of his appendix. This surgery is preceded by a period of malaise, the source of which he cannot identify but is again accompanied by an acute sense of his mortality. He is "haunted by thoughts of dying" (*E*, 30) and this fear undercuts his daily existence, often intensifying at moments when he is happiest. When walking with his wife on the beach for example, suddenly

the profusion of stars told him unambiguously that he was doomed to die, and the thunder of the sea only yards away—and the nightmare of the blackest

blackness beneath the frenzy of the water—made him want to run from the frenzy of oblivion to their cozy, lighted, underfurnished house (*E*, 30).

The narrative shows how Everyman's existence in the world is viewed through this fear of oblivion. When he arrives at old age he no longer has a physically comforting corporeal sanctuary to hide in, his body has become a stark reminder of his being "doomed to die".

Everyman makes the body vital to a sense of self and poignantly demonstrates Eakin's assertion that "every self is damaged, in a larger and deeper sense, by living in and as a mortal body."²⁸² The body as alien is what Everyman is left to experience as ageing and age-associated illness create not a division of self but a feeling of complete disassociation:

When you are young, it's the outside of the body that matters, how you look externally. When you get older, it's what's inside that matters, and people stop caring how you look. (*E*, 85)

"A sense of 'otherness'" had taken over him—"otherness,' a word in his own language to describe a state of being all but foreign to him" (*E*, 129-130). While this sentiment is easily comprehensible to the reader, the implications embedded in it are devastating for the individual concerned and amount to a disappearance of self that is registered as invisibility. The self, as it is known through others, is the self that is perceived, the external self; the self that is the body. Daniel Mendelsohn, reviewing *Everyman*, found Roth's unrelenting focus on the body to be reductive. Roth's "mission here" Mandelsohn states "is reductive in every sense of the word: for him, we're nothing but bodies, in the end, and we know what happens to those."²⁸³ Mendelsohn's assessment of the text, however, is coloured by his impatience for what he considers to be the nostalgia of Roth's later novels. Speaking of Everyman's reflections on his youth, Mendelsohn states: "This reversion to the emotional comforts of childhood seems to me to be connected to the deep nostalgia that characterises this latest period of Roth's writing."²⁸⁴ Yet *Everyman*, like the medieval play it takes its title from, is based on a reckoning that by its very nature entails a return to the past. *Everyman* is self-consciously

²⁸² Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories*, 42.

²⁸³ Daniel Mendelsohn, "The Way Out", review of *Everyman* by Philip Roth. *The New York Review of Books* 53.10, 8 June 2006. < <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/19051> > [accessed July 2009]

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

nostalgic because the past and the refuge the past offers its protagonist is pivotal to a text that primarily concerns itself with demythologizing the narratives ascribed to old age. The text effectively displays the trauma Everyman experiences when his physical self no longer corresponds to his sense of himself *as* a self.

The text reveals how Everyman's existence is legitimised by age and by the quantity of time he has left before he dies. But this time is no longer pregnant with opportunity and his corporeal form reflects this. The living moment Everyman finds himself in is merely about passing the hours "waiting and waiting for nothing." (*E*, 161) His time is therefore justifiably spent in a reverie of the past as he longs for "the tubular sprout that was then his body" (*E*, 126); a time when with the sheer exhilaration of being alive he was "driven to the brink of biting down with his teeth to tear out a chunk of himself and flavour his fleshy existence" (*E*, 127). Time has now stagnated and Everyman can find no consolation: "There was an absence now of all forms of solace, a barrenness under the heading of consolation, and no way to return to what was" (*E*, 129).

The loss of a sexual life is portrayed in the text as a particular source of estrangement. Like Kepesh, Everyman no longer has the physical body to adequately perform and equal his desire. Women his own age do not interest him just as he does not interest the young women he desires. His automatic exclusion is harrowing for him to behold, especially since his narrativised self-identity has been so shaped by his physical prowess and desire. For the most part of his life Everyman's experience and understanding of his self-identity has been dependent upon his corporeal performance as a virile male. "Even in his twenties [...] and on into his fifties," we are told, he had "all the attention from women he could have wanted" (*E*, 160). His narrativised self-identity is defined in terms of such physical virility, and Everyman's Kepesh-like crisis is brought about by the realisation that this "productive way of life was gone" (*E*, 160). This is described with a sense of incredulosity:

He felt for a while that the missing component would somehow return to make him inviolable once again and reaffirm his mastery, that the entitlement mistakenly severed would be restored and he could resume where he'd left off only a few years before. (*E*, 161)

The loss of this entitlement is described as "the unforeseen and the unpredictable" (*E*, 160). The loss of self experienced in old age is "what you could not know" (*E*,

161) and echoes Kepesh's statement in *The Dying Animal* when he asks "Can you imagine old age?" (*TDA*, 35). Ageing then is the epistemological abyss. This epistemological uncertainty is confirmed in the very contours of the body, the contours by which the self is self-known and, as a result of the ageing process, subsequently unknown. When for Everyman, it is time to "worry about oblivion," because it is the "remote future" (*E*, 161), he is gripped by a sense of disillusionment and disbelief because "*secretly*—[he] *was certain*—that life goes on and on" (*E*, 169). But the cemetery where he visits his parents, now "just bones, bones in a box" (170), confirms the inevitable end of self.

In *Everyman* there is a palpable sense of panic at the idea of such inevitability. He is disturbed by the very prospect of leaving. "[T]he very word," we are told, "conveyed him into breathless panic-filled wakefulness" (*E*, 165). Everyman is also haunted by the suicide of Millicent Kramer, a student in his art class, who takes her own life because she can no longer deal with the crippling back pain that had become the mainspring of her identity. He wonders how she made the decision to leave, "how does one voluntarily choose to leave our fullness for that endless nothing?" (*E*, 164) The question is not posed as a judgment but as a point of comparison to see if he also would "have the strength to eradicate everything?" (*E*, 164) In the amateur painting class that he teaches such identifications are commonplace, as personal biographies have become replaced with medical biographies; the individuals present their identities through narratives that describe their *physical* selves (*E*, 80). Everyman, experiencing the "massacre" (*E*, 156) of old age, feels himself becoming a diminished self. He was "in the process of becoming less and less" (*E*, 161). He now experiences his surroundings with an increasing sense of impotency. The particular ways in which he experienced or narrativised his place in the world are no longer available to him because his physical self can no longer accommodate them; and yet it is the fate of Everyman to cling to the narratives that display the experience of self-identity at a time when the corporeal self had not yet begun to problematise the continuation of subjectivity.

IV. *Exit Ghost*

i) “This time it was my mind” (*EG*, 162): Zuckerman

In *Exit Ghost* Zuckerman returns to New York, after an eleven-year seclusion, to undergo an operation that should improve the incontinency he suffers, a side effect of having had surgery for prostate cancer. He returns to indulge a last “crazed hope of rejuvenation”, the “fantasy of regeneration” through “the body refashioned”.²⁸⁵ But his hopes are from the onset ill-starred as the first procedure proves ineffective. In words echoing Everyman, Zuckerman states, “I experienced the bitter helplessness of a taunted old man dying to be whole again” (*EG*, 67). In New York, however, he also encounters the “ghost of [his] desire” (*EG*, 66) when he meets the young Jamie Logan after responding to an ad in *The New York Review of Books* by Jamie and her husband, Billy Davidoff, looking to temporarily swap their New York apartment for a house in the countryside. Having thought that he was done with the “drama of self-discovery” (*EG*, 42), Zuckerman finds himself back “under the spell” (*EG*, 68). As Sarah Kerr observes, “*Exit Ghost* revisits nearly every issue raised right at the launch of Zuckerman’s career in *The Ghost Writer*”.²⁸⁶ Michiko Kakutani calls *Exit Ghost* “a kind of valedictory bookend to ‘The Ghost Writer’,” a “poignant coda to Nathan’s story, putting a punctuation point to his journey from youthful idealism and passion through midlife confusion and angst toward elderly renunciation.”²⁸⁷ The narrative conveys what this renunciation involves as it conveys how up until now Zuckerman had been living “out from under [his] life and times” (*EG*, 70). While living in his cabin in the Berkshires Zuckerman had not only “banished [his] country”, but he had also been “banished from erotic contact with women” due to the prostate surgery that left him impotent as well as incontinent (*EG*, 70). Yet when he impulsively responds to Jamie and Billy’s ad, it, along with the collagen surgery aimed at correcting his incontinency, reignites impulses he thought he had successfully learned to live without.

²⁸⁵ Roth, *Exit Ghost* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007), 31.

²⁸⁶ Sarah Kerr, “Nathan, Farewell”, review of *Exit Ghost* by Philip Roth. *The New York Review of Books*, 54.19, 6 December 2007. < <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/20852>> [accessed July 2009].

²⁸⁷ Michiko Kakutani, “Seeking a Moral at the End of a Tale”, review of *Exit Ghost* by Philip Roth, *The New York Times*, 2 October 2007. < <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/02/books/02kaku.html>> [accessed July 2009].

Zuckerman is keenly aware of the tragic consequences of his reintegration: "To disrupt the basic unity of one's life and change the patterns of predictability at seventy-one? What could be more fraught with the likelihood of disorientation, frustration, even of collapse?" (EG, 96) Yet he is compelled to persist because despite being "sexually disabled" (EG, 52), in meeting Jamie the sexual drive "had madly reasserted itself as the animating force" (EG, 53). "In the presence of this young woman", Zuckerman states, "there was hope" (EG, 53). As discussed in Chapter Four, hope, in the sexual arena, is something Zuckerman had decidedly given up on. In the American Trilogy it is his position of resignation that defines him as a narrator; he has given up his own story in order to fully inhabit the story of others. In *Exit Ghost*, Zuckerman returns to the position of protagonist and has, in direct contrast to the trilogy, little interest in the stories of others.

The novel is set during George W. Bush's re-election for a second term as President. The result of the election occupies and devastates the young people that Zuckerman encounters. Zuckerman, however, is without interest or engagement in this particular historical moment. In noticeable contrast to the trilogy it is a history he has no desire to embrace, he doesn't want to know: "I don't wish to register an opinion, I don't want to express myself on 'the issues'—I don't even want to know what they are. It no longer suits me to know, and what doesn't suit me, I expunge" (EG, 37). While the election consumes Jamie and her husband, what Zuckerman can't expunge is his desire for Jamie. She becomes "all [he] could think about" (EG, 73). Zuckerman, like Kepesh in *The Dying Animal*, almost vampirically looks to her youthful body as a form of rejuvenation. Speaking of his impotency Zuckerman describes how he had "set out to minimize the loss by struggling to pretend that desire had naturally abated" (EG, 67). However, when he meets Jamie he experiences the delusional nature of this struggle as, in her presence, he feels "the bitter helplessness of a taunted old man dying to be whole again" (EG, 67). His contact with Jamie, as with Kepesh, echoes a Yeatsian use of the erotic for rejuvenation. Zuckerman looks to this generation of youth that he is clearly removed from as a means for restoration. But like the speaker of Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium", he is outside the generation that he is observing. "The young/ In

one another's arms",²⁸⁸ serves as a reminder that this arena is "no country for old men".²⁸⁹

Zuckerman's age and his solitude separate him from their concerns. He thus likens himself to Rip Van Winkle returning to "the newly established United States" (*EG*, 15): "I couldn't have felt any more out of it" he says "had I have turned up on the corner of Sixth Avenue and West 54th with Rip's rusty gun in my hand [...] a relic of bygone days amid the noises and buildings and workers and traffic" (*EG*, 15). This almost directly echoes Roth's description of Sabbath's returning to New York:

Sabbath hit the streets with the intention of spending the hours [...] playing Rip Van Winkle [...] He looked the part and had been out of it even longer than Rip. RVW merely missed the Revolution [...] he had missed the transformation of New York into a place utterly antagonistic to sanity and civil life, a city that by the 1990s had brought to perfection the art of killing the soul. (*ST*, 189)

The generational gap is made explicit also in the politics of the young people he engages with. They are still suffering the shock of 9/11, a shock that Zuckerman, like the elections, also feels removed from. This is conveyed when he describes his failed attempt to visit Ground Zero. He never makes it because he has "withdrawn as witness and participant both" (*EG*, 15). To do so now, he admits, would be "wholly out of character for the character [he'd] become" (*EG*, 15). In opposition Zuckerman states "I was merely onlooker and outsider now. I did not intrude on the public drama; the public drama did not intrude on me" (*EG*, 95). This extent to which Zuckerman has withdrawn from "The Present Moment" (*EG*, 1) in its historical significance, is starkly conveyed in this statement as it reminds the reader that it was precisely the intrusion of the public drama into the private drama that obsessed his imagination in the American Trilogy. Zuckerman now, like Kepesh and Everyman before him, has become singularly focused on the ill-starred hope of rejuvenation.

Youth is embodied in the Davidoffs and their somewhat arbitrary appearance in Zuckerman's life not only resurges Zuckerman's waned desire but also provides him with a final adversary in the form of Richard Kliman. Kliman is

²⁸⁸ Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium", *W.B. Yeats: The Poems*, lines 1-2, 239

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, line 1.

a twenty-eight-year old aspiring writer who, much to Zuckerman's dismay, wishes to write the biography of E.I. Lonoff, claiming that he has uncovered a vital secret that will illuminate Lonoff's work and restore him to his rightful place in the American canon. Zuckerman is appalled by the prospect and tells Kliman he will do everything in his power to stop the book being published. Kliman provokes in Zuckerman what he already fears, that he is motivated by the truism of the simple dictum that "old men hate young men" (*EG*, 50). Zuckerman does, in fact, hate Kliman, "I couldn't bear him" he states, "I couldn't bear his outsized boy's energy and smug self-certainty and the pride he took in being a raconteur. The crushing immediacy of him" (*EG*, 264-265). While Zuckerman's dislike is certainly fuelled by Kliman's youth, he is not so vapid as to despise him for his age and ambition alone. His dislike of Kliman is spawned by his unseemly intention to expose Lonoff for what Zuckerman believes to be personal gain. As he sees it "[m]astering" Kliman is his "last obligation to literature" (*EG*, 252). Nevertheless, the antagonism between the two is played out within the drama of youth versus old age.

Exit Ghost encapsulates Joseph Conrad's description in *The Shadow-Line*, of "rash moments". Roth weaves *The Shadow-Line* into *Exit Ghost* as a means of exploring Zuckerman's reengagement with the drama of desire. "One goes on" states the narrator of Conrad's story, "[a]nd the time, too, goes on—till one perceives ahead a shadow-line warning one that the region of early youth, too, must be left behind."²⁹⁰ The novel charts the young protagonist's movement into maturity as he undertakes his first command of a ship. The experience is one that brings the narrator into new psychological territory as his crew fall gravely ill and he is left with only his cook and his deranged chief mate, Mr. Burns, who is convinced that the ship is being haunted by the previous captain who died on board and under hostile relations with his crew. The narrator returns from his twenty days at sea having crossed the imperious shadow-line. "I feel old. And I must be,"²⁹¹ he declares: "All of you on shore look to me just a lot of skittish youngsters that have never known a care in the world."²⁹² The distinction between youth and old age pervades the text and is set up as a binary that often leads to tension and

²⁹⁰ Joseph Conrad, "The Shadow-Line", *Joseph Conrad: Three Novels*, Norman Page ed., (London: Macmillan Press, 1995), 345.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 443.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 443.

confrontation. The narrator barely tolerates the elder Captain Giles before he accepts his first command. Mr. Burns speaks with similar vehemence to his former captain, telling him, "You, sir, are going out of the world [...] you haven't many days left in it [...] One can see it by your face."²⁹³ For him the Captain's behaviour is exemplary of the position "some, nasty, cynical old men assume towards the dreams and illusions of youth."²⁹⁴

According to Conrad's novel "[o]nly the young"²⁹⁵ experience rash moments, an assertion that *Exit Ghost* aims to contradict. "These rash moments," Zuckerman asserts, "don't just happen in youth [...] with age there are rash moments too. My first was leaving, my second is returning" (*EG*, 138). It is significant that Roth should choose to weave this particular text into the novel that marks Zuckerman's departure, as in the preface to *The Shadow-Line* Conrad states that the work comes closest to his own experiences at sea and is therefore perhaps the most autobiographical of his works. Both novels are fictional but contain elements of the autobiographical; both use the technique of fictional writing to convey autobiographical experience. *Exit Ghost* conveys how the shadow-line can take many forms and that it happens not just to the young but to the truly aged also:

I was learning at seventy-one what it was to be deranged. Proving that self discovery wasn't over at all. Proving that the drama that is associated usually with the young as they fully begin to enter life—with adolescents, with young men like the steadfast new captain in *The Shadow-Line*—can also startle and lay siege to the aged [...] even as circumstance readies them for departure. (*EG*, 122-123)

However, when Zuckerman refuses to help Kliman it is precisely Zuckerman's aged condition that Kliman attacks. In words similar to Mr Burns in *The Shadow-Line*, he viciously attacks Zuckerman: "You're dying, old man, you'll soon be dead! You smell of decay! You smell like death!" (*EG*, 104) Despite Zuckerman's interactions with Kliman and the Davidoffs, interactions that propels him further into a "new future", this is in essence "a retrograde trajectory" as it simultaneously brings him into his past. This experience, Zuckerman states was "like being overwhelmed by some rare astronomical event, as though an eclipse of the sun had

²⁹³ Ibid., 389.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 378.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 137.

taken place in the way eclipses had occurred throughout the prescientific eons: without resident earthlings anticipating their imminence" (EG, 52).

Zuckerman's journey into the past is one that brings the reader back to *The Ghost Writer*, where, like Kliman, he assumed the role of the ambitious new writer. Zuckerman is drawn back to the time where he visited Lonoff's secluded home and witnessed the writer in his disciplined habitat as well as the marital drama ensuing from Lonoff's routinized existence. Imposing the discipline of the writer on those around him had left Lonoff's marriage in a state of stasis and matters were further strained by the presence of Amy Bellette, the young graduate student with whom Lonoff was conducting an affair. Like another specter of the past Amy Bellette reappears in *Exit Ghost* bringing Nathan back to his visit with Lonoff, where he had indulged his imagination by recasting Amy as Anne Frank, and writing a fictional biography for her, one in which she survives incognito to witness the publication of her diary. On encountering Amy, Zuckerman sees someone who looks like she has been "evicted from the dwelling of her own body" (EG, 111). Amy, now suffering from brain cancer, bears little resemblance to the woman he met and became enthralled with in Lonoff's home. In the chapter entitled "Amy's Brain" the effects of time and disease on the body and identity are acutely conveyed. The tumour, Zuckerman notes, "was turning her inside out" (EG, 178). Cancer, together with "the power and the force of time," has left her a "defenceless frame overshadowed by death!" (EG, 167)

Roth conveys the sense that illness, like ageing, makes the self other. Amy describes how the tumour made her act unlike herself; "I did things I wouldn't like to repeat" (EG, 171) she tells Zuckerman. Zuckerman later tries to convey this sense of estrangement to Kliman when he argues that Kliman wrangled Lonoff's last manuscript from Amy. "She had that tumor invading her brain. Her *brain*, Kliman," Zuckerman shouts, adding that "she was *truly* out of her mind" (EG, 271). Zuckerman fears that he is hurtling towards a similar fate as Amy, and that Kliman, seeing him for what he fears he may be, is taking full advantage:

I wondered how feeble he thought I was and then wondered how feeble I had become up in my cabin on my own. Why was I even here at this table? None of what he told me had taken place between the two of us had really taken place [...] That I had allowed this meeting to occur left me feeling without anymore protection than Amy, porous, diluted, weaker mentally than I could ever have imagined becoming. (EG, 269)

A significant feature of the text is that all the while Zuckerman is narrating the story he is frantically writing a piece of work called "He and She", "*a play of desire and temptation and flirtation and agony*" (EG, 146), which is imaginatively sprung from his interactions with Jamie Logan. Zuckerman, having realised that he cannot "wish what is into what is not, other than on the page" (EG, 273), dedicates himself to doing just that. *Exit Ghost* is very much concerned with the idea of re/scripting reality and Roth conveys this autobiographical impulse in a number of ways throughout the novel. In the opening sections Zuckerman describes his interactions with his neighbour who seems to have pulled off the scripting of his life. Larry Hollis, "seemed to believe that life was safe only if everything in it was punctiliously planned" (EG, 5). This includes the circumstances of his death. Larry, in many ways could easily be a character for Zuckerman to invest his imagination in, as he did with the protagonists of the trilogy, and in his tendency to narrativise and script reality he significantly resembles the characters of the trilogy, in particular Coleman Silk. Larry, too, epitomises the autobiographical impulse of scripting reality. Here, however, once again Zuckerman has taken possession of his own story and we are offered only a glimpse into Larry's life, "whose sad childhood biography had, by his own estimate, determined every choice he had made" (EG, 5):

That he wanted what he wanted and didn't want what he didn't want was the answer he gave to virtually every question I asked him about the utterly conventional structure he'd made of his life after all those early years of rushing and planning to build it. (EG, 6-7)

As a boy Larry possessed a diary of "Things to Do" (EG, 5) in which he "laid out a future for himself that he followed to the letter for the rest of his life" (EG, 5-6). "From then on," Zuckerman states "everything undertaken was deliberately causal" (EG, 6). Larry had even changed his name from "Irwin Golub to Larry Hollis (as he'd planned to do when he was only ten)" (EG, 6). He met and married someone who met "exactly his specifications for a wife" (EG, 6), like Coleman in *The Human Stain*, and he brought up his children outside the Jewish faith.

When Larry meets Zuckerman he immediately goes about applying this relentless structure to Zuckerman's own existence: "he immediately decided that he didn't want me to eat alone every night and that I had to take dinner at his house

with him and his wife at least once a week.” (EG, 7) Larry decides that Zuckerman’s solitary existence is no kind of life and, in a comic interruption to Zuckerman’s own routine and structure makes him a gift of two kittens. On initially receiving the kittens Zuckerman states, “In my one strong relationship I had fallen into the role that Larry prescribed. I was basically obedient to Larry’s discipline, as was everyone in his life” (EG, 9). However, while “Larry’s path to power was to have complete acquiescence from the beloved in his life—mine was to have no one in my life” (EG, 10). Defending his solitude, Zuckerman tells him “I’m too old to work myself over anymore. Come get the cats” (EG, 12). While Zuckerman pleads the fixity of his nature, Larry Hollis remains true to his. When he is diagnosed with cancer, to avoid his family having to witness an illness which killed both his own parents, he decides to take his own life, planning his suicide as mercifully as he can insuring that his family are together when they receive the news. “By killing himself in the hospital, where there were professionals on hand to attend to his corpse, he had spared Marylynne and the children all that he could of the grotesqueries attendant upon suicide” (EG, 13). In his stringent planning he even takes the time to write a letter to Zuckerman in which he maintains “you cannot be alone. You cannot be without contact with anything. You must promise me that you will not go on living as you were when I found you” (EG, 13). Zuckerman consciously or unconsciously seems to heed the advice and in contradistinction to his earlier claim, “I’m too old to work myself over anymore” (EG, 12), returns to New York.

In New York, however, Zuckerman’s increasing need for and reliance upon his chore book parodies the idea of imposing a grand design on life. Zuckerman does not write down his *projected* aims but is forced, due to the worrying knowledge that his memory is failing, to record the events of his day; a cruel reconfiguration of the scripted autobiographical act of living: “My chore book recorded what I did do and what I was scheduled to do as an aid to a failing memory” (EG, 147). Yet Zuckerman’s scenes of “dialogue unspoken” also record “what hadn’t been done” (EG, 147), fictional events that haven’t occurred between him and Jamie. Zuckerman’s way of sustaining the self is not to impose a plan on his self-identity but rather to transform reality into fiction. Although he admits it “alleviated nothing, achieved nothing” (EG, 147), every time Zuckerman leaves Jamie, he concedes that it had been “terribly necessary to write the instant [he]

came through the door” (EG, 147). Zuckerman is attuned to the futility of these imagined scenes. “[I]sn’t one’s pain quotient shocking enough,” he suggests “without fictional amplification, without giving things an intensity that is ephemeral in life and sometimes even unseen?” (EG, 147) However, in what amounts to a definition of the pull and the compulsion of the writing life, Zuckerman suggests that for some very few people “that amplification, evolving uncertainly out of nothing, constitutes their only assurance, and the unlived, the surmise, fully drawn in print on paper, is the life whose meaning comes to matter most” (EG, 147). Prioritising the unlived life is Zuckerman’s equivalent to Larry Hollis’s or Coleman Silk’s grand scheme for life and however different the approach, what matters is the commitment to transform reality into a script that suits these particular selves and it is through them that they find their sustenance.

For Zuckerman, the idea of not being able to make life cohere on the printed page fills him with dread. *Exit Ghost* conveys how he is working against the dread of erasure, and the disappearance of self that will ensue if he can no longer write:

I’m working here as rapidly as I can while I can, though unable to proceed anywhere near as rapidly as I should because of the very mental impediment that I’m struggling to outflank. Nothing is certain any longer except that this will likely be my last attempt to persist in groping for words to combine into the sentences and paragraphs of a book. (EG, 159)

Zuckerman is becoming increasingly aware of the deterioration of his mind. “I was misspeaking [...] almost daily now, and despite the entries I made in my chore book, despite a persistent attempt to remain concentrated on what I was doing or planning to do, I was forgetting things frequently” (EG, 158). Zuckerman describes these incidents as “a slide into senselessness, as though something diabolical residing in my brain but with a mind of its own—the imp of amnesia, the demon of forgetfulness, [...] were prompting me to suffer these lapses solely for the fun of watching me degenerate” (EG, 159). The ultimate “gleeful goal” of this demon was “to turn someone whose acuity as a writer was sustained by memory and verbal precision into a pointless man” (EG, 159).

Without words and without memory, Zuckerman’s identity is severely compromised. Recalling his latest work Zuckerman states:

When I had finished [...] I couldn't tell whether it was the reading of the completed manuscript that was itself marred by a disordered mind or whether my reading was accurate and the disordered mind was what was itself mirrored in the writing. (*EG*, 160)

Nonetheless, Zuckerman decides to go ahead with publication and allow the book "to reach the public as it was and to yield whatever satisfactions it could" (*EG*, 161). Explaining this decision he states "I needed a strategy by which to endure and go on—as who doesn't?" (*EG*, 161) However, at the point at which Zuckerman is speaking he says that:

the deterioration had advanced to the point where even the most uncertain safeguard is nowhere to be found—where it's a matter not just of my no longer being able to remember the details of the previous chapter but, improbably, of being unable, after only a few minutes, to remember much of the previous page. (*EG*, 162)

In New York, the "leakage" Zuckerman explains, "wasn't just from my penis [...] nor was the crisis waiting to alter me next one that I could continue to hope would isolate the loss in the body alone. This time it was my mind"²⁹⁶ (*EG*, 162). This marks a significant development on Roth's exploration of the ageing process. Whereas *The Dying Animal* and *Everyman* focus almost exclusively on the body, presuming to a certain extent that the mind remained intact—the essential self chained to a deteriorating, "dying animal"—*Exit Ghost* matches the deterioration of the body with a similar and no less disconcerting, dissimulation of the mind.

Exit Ghost marks the final departure of Roth's alter ego. The title taken from the stage directions of *Macbeth* is particularly telling as it draws attention to the haunting presence of Zuckerman's past.²⁹⁷ As Hermione Lee notes, *Exit Ghost* "is a book of haunting. The novelist Nathan Zuckerman haunts his old city like a revenant, and is haunted by ghosts of the past—the ghostly warning voice of his

²⁹⁶ The irony of course is the narrative of *Exit Ghost* which is a recollection of Zuckerman's return to New York. The narrative is not incoherent although it does have epistemological gaps. In particular Zuckerman's interaction with Kliman. Neither Zuckerman nor the reader knows whether or not Kliman is taking advantage of Zuckerman's lapsing memory or whether Zuckerman did in fact make the arrangements to meet Kliman for lunch as Kliman insists he did. Similarly the missed dinner with Amy can either be attributed to Zuckerman or Amy and is never subsequently resolved.

²⁹⁷ While many took the book's title to be taken from the stage direction in *Hamlet*, in interview with Hermione Lee Roth confirmed that the title is actually taken from *Macbeth*. See Roth, "An Audience with Philip Roth", interview by Hermione Lee. *The Observer*, 7 October 2007.

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/oct/07/fiction.philiproth>> [accessed July 2009].

one-time inspiration, the writer EI Lonoff; the haunting figure of Amy Bellette”.²⁹⁸ *Exit Ghost* then, is a book haunted by *The Ghost Writer*, and Lonoff appears in it as the spectral presence. But as Roth himself states “the most haunting ghost of all: [is] the younger man [Zuckerman] once was and no longer is.”²⁹⁹ Consequently he is haunted “by the loss of sexual potency” a loss Roth suggests Zuckerman “managed to contain the pain of” by devoting “himself exclusively to his writing”.³⁰⁰ However, by virtue of the fact that Zuckerman is losing his ability to remember, and consequently his ability to write, these losses become increasingly unbearable. While he may be haunted by the younger man he used to be, in the “present moment” of the text he is moving closer to becoming an insubstantial presence.

While Zuckerman writes to stay alive, what he produces are ghosts of the self, or, in the deManian sense, an epitaph for the self. “I would die” Zuckerman states, “though not before I sat down by my desk at the window[...] with all of them in New York having vanished from sight—and before my ebbing memory receded completely—wrote the final scene of *He and She*” (*EG*, 280). “*He and She*” is a play written to be performed on stage but, given its status as dramatic text encased within a fictional novel, it is a piece destined never to be performed. It, like Zuckerman, is the ghost within the text, a chimera that only exists while performing or being performed. Paradoxically, while “*He and She*” is denied representation through performance as a result of the surety of its surrounding generic structures (the play within the novel, unlike Hamlet’s play within the play, will not be dramatically enacted), Zuckerman is unable to perform the self because of the failure of the key structures that enable this performance—body and mind. In the *Prague Orgy* Roth used another stage direction to introduce Zuckerman: “Enter Zuckerman, a serious person” (*PO*, 72). In this late, and most likely last, Zuckerman novel it is fitting that he should exit as the ghost; the phantom of the written word that he has always been.

²⁹⁸ Lee, Hermione. “An Audience with Philip Roth”, interview by Hermione Lee.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

IV. *Indignation*

i) “perpetual remembering” (*I*, 55): Marcus Messner

In *Indignation* (2009), final exits are brutally inflicted on the young Marcus Messner. While in some ways Roth’s return to a young narrator may seem like a “startling departure from the narratives of old age and experience”³⁰¹, as the novel’s dust jacket imparts, it is in many ways a further exploration of this very theme. Marcus’s youthful obsession with mortality is a counterpoint to Kepesh, Everyman, Zuckerman and, in the text, Marcus’s overbearing father who is obsessed and frightened by the thought that Marcus might die. The novel is set, like “Novotny’s Pain”, against the backdrop of the Korean War which hangs like a harbinger over the events of the novel, signalling the death which will inevitably come to Marcus throughout the course of the novel. It is the fear that Marcus will be drafted in the war that comes to obsess his father and while Marcus attaches it to his father’s “fear for himself” (*I*, 3), as the novel progresses it eventually seeps into Marcus’s psyche to such an extent that his actions seem to bring about this very situation.

The novel is structured into two parts, “Under Morphine” and “Out from Under”. The first part is narrated by Marcus and is a “morphine induced recollection” (*I*, 226). Some reviewers were quick to pronounce Roth’s narrator dead before this was actually the case.³⁰² The confusion arises from the narrator who *believes* himself to be dead: “And even dead, as I am, and have been for I don’t know how long” (*I*, 54). Marcus, however, for the section he narrates does so from a “protracted state of deepest unconsciousness, though without suppressing his mental processes” (*I*, 225). The narrative thus takes shape as a variation on the themes of memory and recollection as explored in Roth’s elegiac novels. Marcus recalls his days working for his father in his butcher shop, his freshman year at Robert Treat College, and then his transfer to Winesburg College, an allusion to Sherwood Anderson’s novel *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919). In Roth’s fictional Winesburg “a serious of mishaps” (*I*, 54) sees Marcus expelled and subsequently

³⁰¹ Roth, *Indignation* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2008), dust jacket.

³⁰² Christopher Hitchens for example states that Roth’s “narrator is speaking posthumously”. Hitchens, “Nasty, Brutish, and Short”, review of *Indignation* by Philip Roth, *The Atlantic*, October 2008. <<http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/print/200810/hitchens-roth>> [accessed June 2009].

drafted. It becomes his fate to literalise the novel's refrain that "the tiniest little things *do* have tragic consequences" (I, 14). Lying in his etherized state, a state, which he mistakes for death, Marcus contemplates the "unpronounceable sentence", "I am dead" (I, 212). Finding himself disembodied, he locates the self in the only place he can, in memory. "I am here [...] as memory alone" (I, 55). Memory, the extended self, is the means by which Marcus conveys his identity. Without body Marcus can only look to a past to constitute his identity. "It's not memory that's obliterated here" he suggests, "it's time" (I, 56). "Lurking disembodied in this memory grotto," Marcus retells his own story to himself "around the clock in a clock-less world" (I, 57).

For Marcus, this narrativised existence is not perceived as life but is registered, in the absence of an awareness of his physical body, as death. In his youthful naivety, Marcus believes that death is "memory cogitating for eons on itself" (I, 55), a "perpetual remembering" (I, 55); a statement that, for him at least, remains uncontested because when the "unpronounceable sentence [is finally] pronounced" (I, 212), it is done so not by Marcus, but by the third-person narrator of "Out from Under". Because Marcus's narration of his relatively short story goes unheard, "[t]he urge to be heard, and nobody to hear me" (I, 212), he pronounces his situation "Profoundly sad" (I, 212). Being purely cerebral, as he believes himself to be, he cannot find an "other." "No response" he thinks, "To provoke no response no matter how painstaking the attempt to unravel and be revealed. All minds gone except my own" (I, 212). What response requires is perception through the body, the expression and the witnessing of the mind through an identifiable self that is the body.

Here, however, disconnected from any sense of his corporeal self, the experience is one of complete aloneness, a world of no response. Marcus's mind is locked into a body "Under Morphine" that, were he to be conscious of, is harrowingly different from his previous anatomical self. Death then, for Marcus, is marked by the death of the body while the mind is what persists. The loss of the body but the persistence of the mind testifies to the perception of a sense of self that is eternal and essentially bound not to the physical self, but to cerebral and narrativised subjectivity. Throughout *Indignation*, Marcus privileges consciousness as the sole source of his sense of self and thus seems to solidify the essentialist notions of self as continuous and markedly separate from the ageing body; a belief

voiced in the anxieties of both Kepesh and Everyman's struggle to reconcile their narrativised identities with the process of ageing. However, this reading is discounted because the monologue is enabled solely by the fact that Marcus, and more specifically, Marcus's body, is "Under Morphine".

Marcus's naively voiced opinion of death as "memory cogitating for eons on itself" (*I*, 55) is brought about because Marcus, under morphine, is numbed to his massacred physical condition: "the bayonet wounds [...] had all but severed one leg from his torso and hacked his intestines" (*I*, 225). Like Consuela, who is "now dying" (*TDA*, 128) and according to Kepesh "now knows the wound of age" (*TDA*, 148), and in contrast to Roth's gradually ageing characters, Marcus's corporeal deterioration is both premature and instant. This immediate debilitation of the body inflicts the "wounds of age" onto his young body as it is propelled into a state of physical impotency; the bayonet had "hacked his [...] genitals to bits" (*I*, 225). The violence committed on the bodies of Marcus (and Consuela), are set in temporal counterpoint with the bodies of Zuckerman (impotent, incontinent), Kepesh (aesthetically anxious), and Everyman (physically massacred), whose only difference to their youthful counterparts are that their wounds have been inflicted over a considerably longer time-span.

The second section of the narrative, entitled "Out from Under", is told in the voice of a third-person narrator. It is this voice that records Marcus's actual death, a death that is physical and marked by the disappearance of both Marcus and his voice: "Here memory ceases [...] brain, kidneys, lungs, heart—everything—shut down [...] Now he was well and truly dead, out from under and far beyond morphine-induced recollection" (*I*, 225-226). In death the mind/body dualism is eradicated as mind takes its place among the corporeal, among the living organs of the body. On account of his youth, he has never had to experience the disjunction of body and mind that is so destabilising to Kepesh, Zuckerman, and Everyman. Whereas Roth's preceding characters are in possession of an all too pronounced awareness of the ravaging outcomes of age, Marcus is cruelly unaware of the current nature of his violently cut down body. In this way *Indignation* can be seen as a variation on the exploration of how identity is registered and represented. As discussed above, without his body to remind him of his current state, Marcus can only look to a past to constitute his identity. The key factors that link the characters of these shorter fictions is time, specifically the time they have left to live. Their

individual memories are directly related to the amount of time allotted to them within Roth's narratives. The body in *Indignation* is reiterating the cruel lesson that, irrespective of self-perception (regardless of how accurate or inaccurate that perception may be), the physical self cannot go unacknowledged and our conception of self is directly and finally pronounced through the organisms that enable this. The body truly does pronounce the unpronounceable and Roth as author can choose to alternately "age" youth and inflict unrelenting memories of "youth" onto the aged.

Roth's exploration of corporeality and the ageing self in these late shorter fictions illustrates that ageing can be as harrowing and violent as illness. Roth's aged subjects are conveyed through a language of violent intrusion that is no different to the surgical mutilations of Consuela and the fatal injuries obtained by Marcus on the battlefield. It is this that makes *Indignation* a fitting variation on Roth's fugal narratives of ageing. Kepesh as having once been "The Professor of Desire", is unable to reconcile his desiring self with his deteriorating, ageing body. For Kepesh, the process of ageing is a physical assault on an otherwise untarnished concept of self. The process of ageing is isolated from the mind and confined to the physical body, "sick with desire/ And fastened to a Dying Animal." Similarly, in *Everyman*, such is the intensity with which he identifies the self as body that Everyman, in his prime, is "driven to the brink of biting down with his teeth to tear out a chunk of himself and flavour his fleshy existence" (*E*, 127). As he ages, this association undergoes a series of "massacres" (*E*, 156) and thus, like Kepesh, Everyman perceives of old age as an aggressive diminishing of self. Zuckerman, in contrast, registers a deterioration of body that has, as previously stated a mental counterpart in that the "crisis waiting to alter" (*EG*, 162) him, is not isolated to the body alone: "This time it was my mind" (*EG*, 162).

The significance of these late narratives can only be fully appreciated when considered in relation to the acts of impersonation, self-invention, and improvisation that Roth's characters have engaged in throughout the course of his career and that this thesis has continually sought to highlight as the key components to the narrativised identities within Roth's writings. These late novels concern characters who, as a result of the failure of their corporeal selves, correspondingly find their capacity for impersonation and improvisation severely compromised. Their corporeal selves can no longer adhere to or carry out the

scripted identities they have inhabited and so the physical, “walking” self is shown to be indistinguishable from the “texts” they have inhabited. The contingency of narrative and corporeality to self-identity is perhaps best summarised by Roth himself in the following memorable passage from *The Prague Orgy*:

No, one’s story isn’t a skin to be shed—it’s inescapable, one’s body and blood. You go on pumping it out until you die, the story veined with the themes of your life, the ever-recurring story that’s at once your invention and the invention of you. (*PO*, 87-88)

Within the writings of Philip Roth, impersonation, improvisation, and self-invention are key components of the “walking text” but ultimately Roth shows that the physical corpus is inescapable and destined to expire.

Conclusion

What emerges from this study of narrativised identities in the writings of Philip Roth is the extensive and far-reaching engagement with subjectivity that is present in his writings and the extraordinarily varied approach he has taken throughout his career in relation to representing the manifold and complex nature of consciousness, self-consciousness, and self-identity. The implications of such a reconsideration, a reconsideration that asserts the centrality of a narrativised identity that freely amalgamates and impersonates “factual” and “fictional” versions of self, instigates a re-appraisal of the writings of Philip Roth. This thesis enables the reader of Roth to fully appreciate the complexity and profundity of his efforts at engaging with and representing the difficulties, however unpalatable they may be, of *being* a self. In doing so this thesis instigates a radical reconsideration of the subjectivities presented throughout Roth’s writings, particularly those characters that have generated negative evaluations on the grounds of the narratives within which Roth situates them. Mickey Sabbath, David Kepesh, Nathan Zuckerman, and indeed “Philip Roth” himself are posited throughout as the creations of a novelist deeply committed to unabashedly exploring human subjectivities in all their provocative and often distasteful actualities. Nowhere is this re-appraisal more apparent than in the character of Sabbath, who, far from being an aberration in Roth’s canon, is identified rather as a central precursor to the tragic protagonists of Roth’s American Trilogy.

This thesis has sought, through its trajectorial analysis of Roth’s writings, to redress the centrality of the American Trilogy to Roth’s career by positing it as a culmination of one strand of his lifelong engagement with modes of representation. Rather than presenting the trilogy solely as a dramatic shift in focus and subject matter, one that forced, as Gail Caldwell notes, Roth’s reviewers to re-assess his place within the canon of great American novelists. Up until *American Pastoral*, Caldwell states, “It [had been] considered fashionable these days to have ‘given up’ on Roth, to have chucked the uncomfortable politics and blackguard dysfunctions so inherent to the novels.”³⁰³ This thesis, through its sustained analysis of the varying acts of narrativised self-identity present in the work of Roth, re-positions the American

³⁰³ Gail Caldwell, “Roth Redux: The Wicked Ironist Is Back - With A Compassionate Version of the *American Pastoral*”, review of *American Pastoral* by Philip Roth, *The Boston Globe*, 20 April 1997. <http://www.boston.com/globe/search/stories/books/books97/philip_roth.htm> [accessed October 2009].

Trilogy, and indeed *Sabbath's Theater*, firmly within the trajectory of Roth's writings that span from his initial exploration of the "autobiographical" mode in *My Life as a Man*, through to the ageing and injured, corporeal orientated characters of his late fictions. These four works, *Sabbath's Theater*, *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, and *The Human Stain*, have been identified as culminations of the techniques of fiction and autobiography, impersonation, ventriloquism, and self-improvisation visibly experimented with by Roth to varying extents throughout his pre-trilogy writings.

Roth has a notably prolific canon and one that has yet to show signs of abating. To the contrary, since *Everyman* (2006), Roth has published a book a year. *The Humbling* joins this group of late novels and will be followed in 2010 by the projected publication of his thirty-first book *Nemesis*. Roth's recent publications have had a notable influence upon the shaping of this thesis as they, with their obsessional focus on the ageing or damaged subject, considerably develop on the approach of this thesis to the experience of subjectivity through Eakin's theories of narrative and self-identity. The final chapter of this thesis consequently takes Roth beyond the trilogy and explores this pivotal new phase in his writings; a phase that has not been as well received as the American Trilogy, but which this thesis posits as crucial to the culmination of Roth's exploration of self-identity. These works are continuations of Roth's lifelong refusal to ignore subjectivity in *all* its registers. They represent explicit and extended meditations on death, the ageing or injured body, the loss of self-identity that is actual as opposed to imitative or performative. Roth turns to explore a ceasing of subjectivity that is brought about by the total failure of the body, illustrating that the brain is ultimately as corporeal as the physical body in which it is encased. Roth relentlessly explores these difficult aspects of humanity in all their harrowing reality. This exploration is made all the more pressing, and indeed, for a reader of Roth that has followed him throughout his formidable career, all the more poignant, by the fact that as Roth ages, so too do his characters. One is left, at this late stage in Roth's career, with not one but several brilliantly rendered narrativised subjectivities who are now struggling to come to terms with the endings of their stories.

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