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**Facing the Fictions:
Henry Roth's and Philip Roth's
Meta-Memoirs**

AUTOBIOGRAPHY IS OFTEN an attempt at setting the record straight, of telling the "facts." The form of this corrective telling will depend in large part on the intended audience and how much information about the life is already available to that audience before the autobiographer assumes the authority that comes with being the subject of the story. And this, in turn, will depend on the extent to which the autobiographer will present his or her life as representative of a collective identity or as a unique subject who has been heretofore either unknown or known but misrepresented. These are not mutually exclusive. When Frederick Douglass sets the record straight in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, he does so as a representative slave who may be personally unknown to his white readers but whose collective life he believes has been distorted and misconstrued by those readers. When he publishes his *second* autobiography, it is to set the record straight about the personal details of his own experience after he has already attained public recognition and fame.¹ Mary Antin wrote *The Promised Land* to cast her life as the representative Jewish-American immigrant and in so doing, to make her individual mark as an *American* writer. Autobiographers such as Benjamin Franklin and Henry Adams were already well-known public figures when they narrated their lives, the former with the bold assertions that emanate from a person aware of his legendary appeal and the latter with the self-consciousness of a class aware of its dwindling importance.²

Setting the record straight assumes even more complex twists when the public figure is an artist whose fictions have been the source of their readers' constructions of their "real" lives. Having drawn on their lives for their fictions, authors nevertheless insist on the autonomy of art, and when the public persists in "misreading" the art and the life, the author may eventually give in to the temptation to relate the "truth." How do we read the autobiographies of writers who have previously been obsessed with storytelling and the creation of fictional worlds and later shift into a genre that presumably unmask the author and disarm him as well?

Both Henry Roth and Philip Roth have recently published autobiographies that they claimed were motivated by the need to tell the facts, record the life, and set the record straight. But their writings share three features that thicken the plot of the writer's self-exposure: (1) Their art has been the source of intense public debate, and hence, their lives have received extensive coverage; (2) The ardent interest in their work has been partly due to their perceived representativeness as Jewish-American writers; this accounts for the drama of their reception and for the public debate; (3) Their autobiographical writings are self-reflexive responses to public discussion of their careers, and they engage in metanarrative strategies in the course of their "telling" of their lives.

The world of Philip Roth's fiction is located two generations from immigration, and its recurring theme is the split identity of the American Jew, torn between the fantasy of making it as an American and the fantasy of a counterlife to American assimilation—either through invoking an "authentic" Eastern European Jewish world, as he does in "Eli, the Fanatic," "I Always Wanted You to Admire My Fasting; or Looking at Kafka," *The Ghost Writer*, and "The Prague Orgy," or through an "authentic" national identity in Israel in *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock*. With his *Zuckerman Bound* trilogy, he adds the dimension of the *Bildung* of the artist, the making of the American Jewish writer and his journeys of self-creation from Newark to Prague, Jerusalem, and London. What has marked Roth's career since the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint* is an aura of scandal as Jewish-American readers insist upon reading his satires as autobiographical works that betray his community by exposing Jewish warts to gentile eyes.³ The attacks on him have been vociferous: he has been accused of unfocused hostility and self-hatred, of provoking antisemitism and jeopardizing the Jew's hard-won and tenuous security in the United States. In an earlier essay on Roth, I observed that "in his repeated self-defenses, Roth has portrayed himself as a victim of incompetent readers, philistines, impervious to irony and artistry."⁴ In short, as far as Roth is concerned, his readers lack the sophistication to distinguish

fiction from autobiography, art from history. With implicit analogues to Joyce, Roth has depicted himself as an artist-rebel, unfettered by social restraints and collective anxieties. To this combative dialogue with his readership, Roth has recently added another dimension—two self-proclaimed autobiographies: *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography* (1988) and *Patrimony: A True Story* (1991).⁵

Are we to treat these works as the product of an aging and exasperated Philip Roth who simply wants to set the record straight? The brashness of a title like *The Facts* from an author who has been masking and unmasking for decades, playing a fast game of hide-and-seek with his readers, is anything but reassuring. Both titles inspire suspicion as well as confidence, the first insisting that the autobiography is both about and *by* a novelist, and the second claiming truth for the "story." Nevertheless, having entered into what Lejeune calls "the autobiographical pact," namely, the identical name of author, narrator, and character, *The Facts* certainly qualifies as an autobiography.⁶ Given the self-conscious play of life and art in Roth's novels, to what extent is he testing the limits of the autobiographical genre, and to what end? Given the unease of Jews when it comes to asserting and celebrating the "I" as opposed to the communal "we," how is Roth's intersecting of fiction and reality an anti-autobiographical strategy? The Philip Roth "I" narrator emerges as an arena for dialogue between the author and his readers, an act of community as much as it is an assertion of self.

Roth's narrative traces a journey toward being American and toward being an artist from the starting point of being a Jew. The book is divided into six parts: a prologue and five chapters. The prologue establishes the credo of his childhood—"Hear, O Israel, the family is God, the family is One." "In our lore," he writes, "the Jewish family was an inviolate haven against every form of menace, from personal isolation to gentile hostility" (14). His father, he maintains, became the original mold for his identity, which he lists in the following order: American, Jew, citizen, man, writer. Each successive chapter recounts attempts at assimilation into American life, each from a different perspective. The opening sentence of the first chapter underscores the centrality of his American identity: "The greatest menace while I was growing up came from abroad, from the Germans and the Japanese, our enemies because we were American." But in the same paragraph, he qualifies that identity with a reminder of his minority position within America: "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" (20). In that first paragraph, the keynote for the first half of the autobiography appears:

Though I knew that we were tolerated and accepted as well—in publicized individual cases, even specially esteemed—and though I never doubted that

this country was mine (and New Jersey and Newark as well), I was not unaware of the power to intimidate that emanated from the highest and lowest reaches of gentile America. (20)

The first description of the interior of his family's apartment notes that a framed replica of the Declaration of Independence hung above the telephone table on the hallway wall. It had been awarded to his father by his employer, the Metropolitan Life Insurance company, for a successful year in the field. The autobiography ends with his own independence from family and collective identity of any sort: "I was determined to be an absolutely independent, self-sufficient man" (160). It is a statement of intention, not achievement. But it is an intention that conforms to the model of the self-reliant American hero, from Natty Bumppo and Emerson, to Huck Finn, Jake Barnes, Humphrey Bogart, and the Lone Ranger.

The first chapter, entitled "Safe at Home," contrasts a homogenous Jewish communal and familial life with an occasionally inhospitable gentile world, from the corporate boardrooms of his father's insurance company, where promotion beyond a certain point was unthinkable for a Jew, to the lumpen kids at the Jersey shore hollering "Kikes! Dirty Jews!" (23). Being Jewish, he recalls, was like "having two arms and two legs. It would have seemed strange *not* to be Jewish—stranger still, to hear someone announce that he wished he weren't a Jew or that he intended not to be in the future" (31). The second chapter, "Joe College," is a rite of passage into American academe with Jewish quotas, campuses like Princeton that simply didn't "take Jews," and fraternities divided along religious and ethnic lines. But the most dramatic crossing of the boundary from the safe haven of the Jewish home to the perils of the gentile world takes place in mid-book, the chapter satirically entitled "Girl of My Dreams," when he meets the woman who becomes his muse, nemesis, wife. She is more than the exotic Aryan gentile woman, the shiksa/temptress who promises uninhibited sexuality and constitutes the surest sign of making it in WASP America; she is a *victim* of that world who, for all her sociobiological edge, craves the nurturing and secure world that Philip seeks to escape. The incompatibility of their backgrounds was for Roth the decisive evidence that he was free from the pressures of convention. As he put it, "I was not only a man, I was a free man" (87). Thus, in his marriage to the gentile woman from an abusive and broken family, he turns his seeming un-American Jewish background into an asset. "The stories I told of my protected childhood might have been Othello's tales about the men with heads beneath their shoulders, so tantalized was she by the atmosphere of secure, dependable comfort that I ascribed to my mother's genius for managing our household affairs and to the dutiful perseverance of both my parents even in their years of financial strain" (92).

At this point in the book, it becomes clear that Roth is chronicling the portrait of the artist along with the tale of Americanization. With hindsight, he realizes that she initiated him into the world of Sherwood Anderson and Theodore Dreiser, to the "menacing realms of benighted American life that so far I had only read of in novels." His own role was drawn from literature as well: "I cast myself as the parfit Jewish knight dispatched to save one of their own from the worst of the gentile dragons" (94). After itemizing her vices and naming her "my worst enemy ever," he concludes the chapter with, "Reader, I married her" (112), an ironic reference to Bronte that casts Josie as the madwoman in the attic, and Roth as both a long-suffering Rochester and a moralistic Jane.

The idealization of Jewish family life in this third chapter gives way to fierce intra-communal strife in the fourth, when Roth the artist is attacked by American Jewish readers for what they detect as antisemitism in his satirical fictions. At a Yeshiva University symposium, the moderator asks him: "Mr. Roth, would you write the same stories you've written if you were living in Nazi Germany?" After thirty minutes of grilling by the audience, he could see that he was "not just opposed but hated" (127). But this "bruising public exchange" marked a turning point in his writing career, as he transformed the denial of his work by many of his Jewish readers into the main theme of his writing: Jewish self-definition and Jewish allegiance inspire a whole series of satires about the relation between art and society, aesthetics and morality, the facts and their literary representation. His autobiography, *The Facts*, is another in this series of projections, counterlives, and dialogues with his readers, in which the text internalizes and anticipates public debate. The artist finds his true subject, then, as a result of the wound inflicted on him by his community. All this in a chapter entitled "All in the Family," an allusion both to the commandment in the prologue about the sanctity of the family in Jewish life and to America's most successful and popular television satire, in which Archie Bunker, representative blue-collar American, derides and offends every stereotypical minority in American society.

"Now Vee May Perhaps to Begin," the title of the final section, further problematizes the factuality of this autobiography, first, because it is an intertext from one of his own *fictions*, namely, the last line of *Portnoy's Complaint*, the novel judged as obscene autobiography by his Jewish readers who feared it would damage their community's acceptance among "Americans." Second, because the voice of the Viennese psychoanalyst signals storytelling as therapy, whose goal is the reconstruction of a coherent narrative, not the innocent retrieval of facts, which may be impossible. Moreover, "to Begin" here refers not only to the beginning of the talk cure, but also to the new beginning in the author's life, having

extricated himself from wife and family. The last chapter of the autobiography echoes both the *Künstlerroman*, Stephen Daedalus free of the nets that restrain him (even if ironically), and the traditional model of American literature, the independent individual—"I was determined to be an absolutely independent self-sufficient man."

Were the autobiography to end here, we could comfortably place it within these two models, but true to Roth's fictional *oeuvre*, he takes it one step, one metafictional, Pirandellan step further. In a paratext that frames the autobiography, Roth submits his manuscript to his most critical reader, Nathan Zuckerman, his *fictional* alter ego, his own invention. Zuckerman replies in the letter appended to the text, and strongly disapproves. Taking on the Philip Roth persona that the author has discarded in the writing of his autobiography, Zuckerman accuses him of idealizing his family past in order to curry belated favor with an audience that has convicted him of treason. "Your Jewish readers are finally going to glean from this what they've wanted to hear from you for three decades . . . that instead of writing only about Jews at one another's throats, you have discovered gentile anti-Semitism, and you are exposing *that* for a change" (166). He advises Roth to "give up on giving them, thirty years too late, the speech of the good boy at the synagogue." "I'm not a fool," writes Zuckerman, "and I don't believe you" (168).

Paratext is not new to autobiography. Often it functions to lend authority to the telling of a life by someone whose own identity is too marginal to lend sufficient credibility or significance to the narrative. Frederick Douglass's autobiography, as the life of a former slave, required the weight of two prominent white male abolitionists to convince readers of its veracity (Wendell Phillips and William Lloyd Garrison), and Elie Wiesel's narrative of his life in a concentration camp is framed by the authority of the French Catholic theologian Francois Mauriac.⁷ Roth has reversed this generic pattern by making the paratext undermine authenticity and call into question the truth of the recounted life. Since the voice of doubt is itself a creation of the author and therefore contained within the same imagination, it has a paradoxical countereffect, anticipating and neutralizing criticism by inscribing the skeptical reader into the text. In terms of representation, then, the novelist is all too aware of the partial self that is reconstructed in autobiography, of the limits of the genre. His paratext is an acknowledgment that the autobiography may satisfy the needs of the writer at the time of writing, but it is not a reliable chronicle of the past. By creating an adversarial relationship between his writing self and his social self, he allows the reader to witness his wrestling with his own shadow. Moreover, his shadow/double is the voice of the Jewish community that has, by its criticism and accusations, shaped the self that is, in turn, the subject of the autobiography.

Where does that leave him and his readers in terms of representativeness? That he casts his life in the mold of the self-reliant American is underscored by Roth, who places this observation in the mouth of Zuckerman's wife, a British gentile woman in a tug of war with Roth for the soul of Zuckerman. "Only an American," she says, "could see the fate of his freedom as the recurring theme of his life" (189). That he casts his life in the mold of the victimized Jew is Zuckerman's take on the autobiography—that Roth needs his persecution, savors the wounds inflicted on him by both his mad gentile wife and his abusive Jewish public. That he makes his Jewishness the determining factor in his parents' and his own life is Roth's shaping principle in the book—"To me, being a Jew had to do with a real historical predicament into which you were born." The metafictional dimension, therefore, the paratext, is not merely obligatory pyrotechnics for a postmodern narrative. It is a strategy for foregrounding the problem of representativeness in contemporary American letters, and it is an admission that the autobiographical genre poses problems for the Jewish writer. Multiculturalism has produced a contemporary American self that no longer believes in an essential American experience, but is equally skeptical about ethnic or racial identity as a safe haven. Identity politics is deterministic about each American's point of departure but stubbornly *idealistic* about the freedom to maneuver between categories and to sustain multiple identities. The splintered self that enters into a dialogue with its autobiographer, then, is a new form of representative American, while the insistence on community and "historical predicament" as the core of this self-making is a Jewish version of this genre.

Henry Roth's miraculous comeback after sixty years of near-complete silence is already an American literary legend. *Mercy of a Rude Stream*,⁸ which he had originally intended for posthumous publication but which he decided to publish two years before his death, is a multivolume autobiographical fiction whose main character does not bear the name of the author of the book. But Ira Stigman's life closely resembles that of Roth, and the narrative of that life is interspersed with sections in bold type that are self-reflexive comments by the author on his work and on his life. The first-person narrator of these interludes elides the distinction between Henry Roth and Ira Stigman and the names or initials of the narrator's wife, children, and other family members are identical to those in Roth's "real" life. Moreover, the subject of the interludes tends to be information that has been public knowledge for some time (such as Muriel Roth's musical career or Henry's illness), or a fixation with the accuracy of the facts of Ira's life and their correspondence to those of

Henry's past, or the very act of writing *Mercy*, complete with details about the state of the author's health, the anguish of his writer's block, the haunting presence of *Call It Sleep*, and its role in forging his identity. In fact, there are three time frames at work in these sections, as the author compares the present text both with the events of the life recorded and to an earlier version that he is revising and expanding. Even if the narrative of the life of Ira Stigman were not an approximation of his own life (which it is), then certainly the long stretches of metanarrative would themselves qualify as autobiographical writing. Finally, the inside cover of each of the books displays group portraits of Roth's own family and friends.

The public debate about Roth for decades has centered on speculation about his protracted writer's block. Theories abound from his having exhausted all his materials as a deracinated Jew in *Call It Sleep*, a classic of disinheritance, to his beating at the hands of longshoremen while trying to obtain material for his second proletarian novel.⁹ In later years, Roth admitted to reaching an impasse stylistically as he strove to exorcise Joyce from his writings and to invent a form more reflective of his Jewish sensibility, and he attributed his renewed writing powers to his renewed Jewish identity brought about by his identification with Israel during the 1967 war. He felt "as if I were personally under attack" and he found himself "heading back to being a Jew."¹⁰

Mercy of a Rude Stream, the first volume of which was published in 1994, picks up where *Call It Sleep* leaves off: the protagonist, whose family has just moved from the Lower East Side to Harlem (as Roth's family had done), is eight years old, and the year is 1914. The young Roth as Ira Stigman encounters the vulgarity of the streets on the one hand, and the wonders of language and the joys of playing with words on the other. "How do you say it? Before the pale blue twilight left your eyes you had to say it, use words that said it: blue, indigo, blue, indigo. Words that matched, matched that swimming star above the hill and tower; what words matched it?" (81). Whereas *Call It Sleep* is Joycean and high modernist in its use of stream of consciousness and experimental narrative techniques, *Mercy of a Rude Stream* is more consistently naturalistic, aiming for an evocation of the period, its preoccupation with the war and its many voices both inside and outside home. Its only departure from this realistic narration is the metanarrative referred to earlier, in which the aging author confides to his computer, Ecclesias, about his selective memory and artistic choices.

What is shared by the three volumes that have been published to date (*Mercy of a Rude Stream*, *A Diving Rock on the Hudson*, and *From Bondage*), apart from the narrative strategy of the life of Ira Stigman interlaced with meta-memoirs, is the theme of boundary crossing, as the character moves out of his Jewish domestic world into an American public space. These

crossings, whether geographic, social, or cultural, are also forms of transgression, and are always accompanied by a sense of guilt and shame. Hence, the name Ira Stigman, whose surname marks him with a "stigma" and whose given name is a bilingual pun, I Ra, the latter being the Hebrew word for evil. When referring to his debilitating disease (rheumatoid arthritis) in the metanarrative, Roth decides to abbreviate it "hereafter as RA (Joyce would be happy at the correspondence, being batty on the subject that RA in Hebrew meant anything bad, the whole spectrum of bad)" (59). That Roth came to see Joyce as a negative influence on his writing makes this statement particularly resonant.

This splicing together of English literature, which became his passion, and the Jewish outsider's perspective on it is evident on the first page of the book, in the epigraph to volume 1, which is in two parts: the quotation from Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* from which the book's title is drawn, and Roth's talmudic commentary on Shakespeare's text. Henry on Henry. "Not to dare quibble with peerless Will," he begins, as he proceeds to question Shakespeare's choice of the word "stream"—"Tide, the alternate word, might have been more exact, but not nearly so felicitous." To choose to be felicitous rather than exact: this is the artist's prerogative. And this is the issue that preoccupies Roth in his autobiographical fictional writings, as will become evident in the second volume.

The first paragraph of *Mercy* sets the paradigm of the autobiography—banishment from Eden. In midsummer 1914 when war broke out ("Malkhumah!" bellow the newspaper street vendors), Ira's (and Henry's) family moved from the Lower East Side to Harlem. "Everything else could be the same, the war, the new relatives; if only he could have had, could have lived a few more years on the Lower East Side, say, until, his Bar Mitzvah. Well."¹¹ Roth himself is aware that he may be romanticizing the homogenous organic Jewish community on the Lower East Side from which he was prematurely severed as a pretext for his creative impasse, as an answer to his disappointed public. A few pages later, however, he admits in one of the interludes that "Ira and his parents were *not* the first Jews living on 119th Street. He was not, in short, without alternative of Jewish kids to hobnob with, enticing to the reader as that sort of extreme predicament might be" (36). In short, he chose to be felicitous rather than exact, and then he chose to lay bare the device. Yet the street fights with the Irish and Italian boys, which also sometimes resulted in beatings at the hand of his father, undermined his self-esteem and thrust him into the world of books. "He could almost feel the once self-assured East Side kid shriveling within himself, leaving behind . . . a kind of void" (33).

As Ira Stigman crosses over into the English "other" world through his feverish consumption of books (Cooper, Twain, Hugo, Scott), the

metacommentary shifts into contemporary Middle Eastern politics. More specifically, as Ira's Uncle Louie becomes truly Americanized—a postman who “could reminisce entrancingly about Indians and buffalo, about mountain and desert” (18), in the interlude, “Ira's half-closed eyes focused on the computer screen. Ira mused on the meaning of the Syrian-controlled PLO hit squads” (8). For Ira Stigman/Henry Roth, child of the Lower East Side and Harlem, ashamed to be heard speaking Yiddish on the train, there are two counterlives that structure the narrative of *Mercy*—Americanization and Zionism. With the receding of the Lower East Side Yiddish space that he inhabited as a child, the author seeks alternative romantic sites, organic worlds that hold out a sense of belonging. The two fantasies of assimilation and nationhood are polarized to their extremes in his work. “My father, a Zionist,” imagines the author, “Let's away to a kibbutz. I would know chiefly hard work, rigor, danger, but also kinship, precious kinship, dignity. But alas, I wouldn't have known M——” (127). Young Ira Stigman in 1914 inhabits a world of

Jean Valjean and Huck Finn and D'Artagnan, and David Copperfield and Martin Eden. . . . You were more in their world than in the Jewish world, in their world where you wanted to be, and now that he was what he was and couldn't break away from their world and didn't want to, maybe some day he'd find a way out of his Jewish slum world into their world. . . . Jewishness, it would be like leaving nothing. Nearly. . . . (234)

Years later he will connect his attenuated Jewishness with his writer's block: “the little he knew, the essential plug he had retained of his Jewishness, of Jewish tradition. Odd. And when he tried to pluck it out. . . . creative inanition followed” (238).

In *Mercy*, there are numerous references in the metanarrative to an omission that will have to be rectified, to facts concealed. Just as Zuckerman chides Philip Roth for falsifying the truth, Henry Roth's alter ego Ecclesiastes reproaches him for not revealing what could cast light on his controversial literary silence. “You'll sooner or later have to get over that hurdle. . . . I told you at the outset, when you deliberately omitted that most crucial element in your account, that you would not be able to avoid reckoning with it. . . . You made a climax of evasion . . . an apocalyptic tour de force at the price of renouncing a literary future” (86). In volume 2, *A Diving Rock on the Hudson*, Roth corrects the omission—Ira Stigman is depicted as having committed incest with a younger sister during his teenage years in his parental home. In fact, *A Diving Rock* is a confession of sins, of betraying “home” through two abominations, sexual relations with a gentile whore and also, repeatedly, with his sister. In this book of boundary crossings and betrayals, the first transgresses the boundary between Jew and Gentile, the second transgresses the boundary between Jew and Jew, violating the Jewish family. The encounter with

the whore is depicted as sordid and grimy, devoid of the romance in Joyce's similar scene in *Portrait of the Artist*, and the incestuous act is depicted as devoid of all emotion, a matter of the flesh entirely, with his sister as willing accomplice. At times, the act takes place on the pages of the Yiddish newspaper spread out on their parents' bed.

Ira is filled with self-loathing. In *A Diving Rock*, the binary world of Jewish and non-Jewish is compounded by two new frames of references: class and education. For the first time, Ira encounters an upper-middle-class Jew from a professional family who knows no Yiddish and whom he mistakes for a Gentile. En route to a picnic with Larry and Edith (the New York University literature professor who represents Eda Lou Walton), he tosses away the salami sandwich his mother prepared for him while still on the train. "The more he sniffed the paper bag, the more worried he became, the more the contents assaulted and alarmed his nostrils. Jewish immigrant boor, he was certain to be judged, slum, Jewish boor" (379). That it is possible to be Jewish and yet, in Ira's eyes, as refined as Larry, intensifies his self-hatred.

Nothing unsettles his tidy worldview more than a cultivated Jewish woman with literary aspirations whose social status derives from being the granddaughter of a great Yiddish writer, Sholem Aleichem. In an extraordinary scene, Ira meets Tamara in the Greenwich Village world to which he has gained entrée through Larry and Edith.

"You're Tamara?"

"Yes," she conceded.

"What happened to the guy?"

"I don't understand. What guy?"

"You might be Tamar yourself," Ira said. "I mean the real one. In the Bible." He was being uncouth. Cut it out, he counseled himself. . . .

The others around the candle-lit table stopped chatting and listened. He struggled with the boor inside him, unmanageable suddenly. "The guy who raped her. He was her brother, wasn't he?"

"He was her half-brother, Amnon."

"Oh. He was only her half-brother."

"Only?"

"Yeah. So that was only half so bad."

"For heaven's sake!" she said, after the slightest, but curiously electric, throb of silence. "I didn't think when I came here this evening I was going to discuss degrees of incest." . . .

Then his heart stopped beating. "No, I know. But what happened to him?"

"Absalom killed him."

"Who? Absalom?"

"Please!" Condescending and affronted, she clearly found the conversation distasteful. (346)

Ira's stigma, derived from the rape of his own sister, spurs him on to act the boor that he believes he is destined to play for Gentiles and, in this new and menacing world, for literati and intellectuals, even Jewish ones. Acting the part of the *enfant terrible*, Ira's verbal aggression toward Tamara reenacts the rape of his sister. The vehicle for his boorishness, however, is a literary reference, i.e., he is participating in the intellectual sparring that he associates with the Village world from which he also feels estranged. To protect himself from the wound of this banishment, he wears it like a badge, cultivating his boorishness and taking one further step. When a young man named Nathan informs Ira in Tamara's presence, "You're asking the right person. She's Sholem Aleichem's granddaughter," and Tamara reprimands Nathan for name-dropping, Ira assures them, "That's all right. I don't know who he is" (347). The offense is now complete, but at the expense of calling attention to his self-proclaimed ignorance about Jewish culture. As he turns his back on them, he reaches the conclusion, "Jesus Christ, he didn't seem to be at home anywhere, not here among these—these well-behaved, well-to-do students, like the kid, the grown-up guy by now, whose silver-filigreed fountain pen Ira had swiped. And he wasn't at home at CCNY either, all of them Jewish, trying desperately to assimilate. . . . He wasn't at home anywhere" (347).

There is only one place open to him at the end of this volume. "Writing was all that could in some way gain rehabilitation—without his seeking pardon or absolution, but by employing what he was. . . . Writing was all there was left to him as justification for being what he now was. . . . It was a choice that was not a choice; it was a choice without alternative, without option. It was his sole recourse" (410).

The shift in Roth's relationship to his audience from his writing of *Call It Sleep* (1934) to his composing *Mercy* over fifty years later is evident in the manner in which Yiddish and Hebrew are incorporated into his narrative, as indicators of exclusion and inclusion. In *Call It Sleep*, Roth had already woven languages other than English into his text, namely, Yiddish, Aramaic, Hebrew, and Polish, each with its own signification for him: Yiddish as the language of David's childhood, literally; it acts as mother tongue for which he, just as his author, retains an emotional attachment. In volume 3 of *Mercy*, Roth observes, "And the language: how important a factor that was: Yiddish, in his case. He witnessed its drying up, his mother tongue shriveling in a single lifetime" (28). As counterpoint to this mother tongue looms Hebrew, the liturgical language that is the Law of the Father, the paternal legacy of Judaism.¹² Rival to both of these is English, which exacts the child's allegiance in all its varied

forms, but which also exacts a loss of Jewish identity, an abrupt disinheritance. Roth makes uses of religious texts, such as the Book of Isaiah and the Passover Haggadah, to invoke both Jewish and Christian hermeneutics as competing forces for the child's soul.¹³ In *Call It Sleep*, Roth was intent on translating his world for the American reader, and throughout he provided a variety of translation strategies, so that the book would be accessible to readers unfamiliar with Jewish traditions and texts. In *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, there is a much greater proportion of non-English words than in his earlier book, some of which are translated for the reader in the course of the narrative, and some not. Instead, Roth provides a glossary at the end of each volume, *only* for Yiddish terms, and *only* for those not explained in the course of the book. The note preceding the glossary states that "Hebrew religious terms that are general knowledge—Torah, Talmud, or yarmulka, for example—are also not included."

Despite this extensive glossary and the translations in passing, terms remain that are not accessible to the reader with no knowledge of Yiddish or of Hebrew liturgy, such as bilingual puns. When Uncle Louie encourages Ira's mother to leave New York for "Companionship, change, another climate," she replies with a laugh, "Passion and Kholyorado." "Indeed passion and Colorado" Louie reiterates, as "Kholyorado" contains within it "cholera," a Polish-Yiddish curse. When Mr. Klein, his supervisor at the gourmet delicatessen where Ira works, goes through the store's inventory with him (most of the gourmet foods unknown to Ira), he itemizes as follows: "'Pay attention. A package rusk. A package pralines. A whole Gouda . . . *Haguda*.' He handed the strong-bound cheese to Ira. 'You know from *haguda*? *Mah nishtanu he laila hazeh*?' " (266), Klein is referring to the Haggadah, which does appear in the glossary as "the text of the Passover ceremony." But the opening sentence of the Four Questions, traditionally asked by the youngest present (*Mah nishtanu*), is not listed anywhere.

Earlier, when Mr. Klein asked him, "You know what is a *kiddush ha shem*?" Ira replies, "*Kiddush*, I know. What's the *ha shem*?" The whole phrase means "sanctification of the Lord" (and not in honor of the Lord, as stated in the glossary), and the word that Ira doesn't know is the reference to God. Moreover, what Ira does know, namely, the *kiddush*, which is the traditional prayer over the wine on the Sabbath and on festivals, is not listed anywhere. Mr. Klein is amused by Ira's ignorance: "[He] burst into a laugh. 'What's the *ha shem*! *Oy, bis dee a Yeet*.'" (What's "the Lord"? *Oy*, some Jew you are!) (247). But the latter sentence, a major indictment of Ira and a central theme of the book, is not accessible to a non-Yiddish speaker. Knowledge of Jewish tradition is also necessary to understand the reference to Ira as the *kaddish* ("Let the *kaddish* wait for you there. I'll give him a bag with food you can eat," 113). The *Kaddish* is

the name of the prayer for the dead, and in traditional Eastern European homes, the eldest son may be referred to as the Kaddish, as he will be the one responsible for its recitation at his parents' graveside. When an excerpt from the Kaddish is included in transliteration in the text, "Kadish, v'yiskadaish, shmai raboh," it is quoted incorrectly and incorrectly identified in the glossary as "the first line of the prayer for the dead" (259). In a multivolume work in which he exposes his shame and self-loathing in an act that is a perversion of remaining within the fold, he affirms his Jewish identity by addressing a divided audience of those who do or do not require translation. Given the shift of his allegiance from assimilationist Communism to Jewish nationalism, these aesthetic moves may also be read as a subversion of the polarities he once believed were his choices: incestuous self-hating particularism or inaccessible (to him) genteel American assimilation.¹⁴

In Jewish civilization, confession has always been a communal activity, addressed first to the fellow man who suffered injury and then to God in the presence of the community. Confession in general is posited on truth telling, and its authority exists in relation to other discursive formations—religion, psychology, philosophy. One confesses in order to be judged by a standard of truth that is part of a cultural process.¹⁵ Autobiography has evolved from confession; in the latter, the emphasis is on telling the *truth*, but in the former, the emphasis is on *telling* the truth. In other words, autobiography is self-representation that structures events and motives in order to position one's story within a discourse of truth and of identity.¹⁶ The two autobiographies discussed in this essay are confessions in that they originate either from an accusation leveled at them by their community or from a sense of guilt, and they want to set the record straight in an act of truth telling. They are addressed to a community of readers who have formed ideas about the authors that the authors themselves deny when measured against their own sense of their lives, yet the relationship between these authors and their public have in large part shaped their view of their own lives. They have repeatedly defined themselves against their readers' view of them. These books are self-conscious works absorbed in the telling, in the strategies of unmasking and of evading that incorporate postmodern metacommentaries on their own telling. The choice of literary strategy is intertwined with the communal aspect of their self-representation.

The contrast in their dialogues with their audience is startling. Philip Roth, at the center of scandal, accused of betraying his community and of abominations, claims that he has been victimized. He "confesses" his normality, his innocence. Henry Roth, wrapped in a long silence and admired by a readership enamored of the innocent boy depicted in *Call It Sleep*, confesses his sins, his abnormality. He wants to set the record

straight by shocking his readers into the realization that he was victimizer, not only victim, that the innocent only child of *Call It Sleep* is an elegant evasion. Indeed, he blames his long creative silence on his deception of his public, on his cover-up of his own sinful nature. Both authors assume that their readers come to these books with information about their public personae. The reader of *Mercy* who cannot identify M. as Muriel, or does not associate his earlier tour de force with *Call It Sleep*, who does not read Ira Stigman as the young artist Henry Roth, does not have the basic tools to read the work. Moreover, both authors also invent narrative strategies that challenge the main "genre" of each work. While *Mercy of a Rude Stream* is categorized as "fiction," the metafictional interludes with their clear markings of the life of Henry Roth undermine the fiction and shift into autobiography. In *The Facts*, the paratext written by Roth's fictional alter ego Zuckerman undermines the truth value of what is categorized as an autobiography. In short, both writers have so much of themselves invested in their readers' constructions of their lives that their self-representation cannot be disengaged from their audiences. Cast in the role of representative Jewish writers of their generations, both Philip and Henry Roth cannot definitively *tell* the story of their lives; they can only *retell* their stories for a community of readers with whom they are engaged in an act of mutual self-definition.

Epilogue

Academic papers on autobiographies during this last decade have often turned into autobiographical performances themselves. Perhaps this follows logically from the critical assumption that if subjectivity is inevitable, then self-representation on the part of the critic is essential information for the reader. Perhaps it is evidence of the impasse of literary study, or of the humanities more generally, in that it no longer subscribes to impartiality or "facts" as either possible or even desirable.

In 1970, I defended *Portnoy's Complaint* before an audience of WZO members in Frankfurt, Germany. I was en route to Israel from the U.S., stopping in Germany, my native country, for the first time since my parents had emigrated when I was only a toddler. That summer in Israel was the turning point that finally resulted in my making my home there years later. But there I was, in halting German (my mother tongue), defending Roth's most controversial book to a room full of horrified German Jews convinced that Roth's vicious satire would unleash a new wave of antisemitism. Acutely aware of that Frankfurt setting as my counterlife, I argued passionately for his literary value (I had just received my B.A. as an English major from Penn, where Roth was on the faculty)

and for his sharp insights about Jewish identity that his readers, appalled by what they deemed his "vulgarity," refused to recognize. The episode itself was a perfect illustration of the ongoing drama between Roth and his Jewish readers, the drama that eventually became the catalyst and vehicle for the remarkable books that followed, most notably, *The Ghost Writer* and *The Counterlife*. The disdain for Roth in that sumptuous living room, a cross between prewar Vienna and New European chic, the anger expressed by two generations of German Jews, moved me again and again over the years to return to Roth's work as if to the scene of a crime to relocate the crime in the witnesses and not in the writer.

When Henry Roth invited me to visit with him in 1991, it was the culmination of many years of reading and rereading, teaching and writing about *Call It Sleep*. Having been brought to America at the age of two (as I had been) from the same area of Austro-Hungary, having grown up in a non-English-speaking home and then having embraced the English literary world, Roth was a figure whom I admired and with whom I identified. His sitting room in the Retirement Home in Albuquerque, where he lived after Muriel's death, was itself an example of the "world elsewhere" that haunts David Shearl in *Call It Sleep*, only Roth's space was a strange in-between, a nostalgia for two roads not taken, for two Jewish worlds Roth romanticized: on the wall, a greatly enlarged photograph of the Lower East Side circa 1900 and on his desk a copy of the *Jerusalem Post*. Seated in a wheelchair and nattily dressed in what he himself boasted was an L.L. Bean jacket and sporting the Navajo ring he had been given by Eda Lou Walton, Roth wanted to know all about Israel, and I wanted to know all about Henry Roth. At my departure two days later, after hours of conversation, he urged me to take the manuscript of what was eventually to be the first volume of *Mercy of a Rude Stream* (and which he had at that time intended for posthumous publication), and to read it upon my return to Israel. I have never read anything with the absorption, and dread, that I experienced at that time. The metanarrative was heavy-handed; it needed revision. But could I trust my judgment about Henry Roth's work? And even if I were convinced that the manuscript was flawed, could I tell this to Henry Roth? Moreover, I admired and respected him too much to convey some innocuous compliments that would be detectable to his subtle ear. I never mentioned it again; he never asked. We continued to correspond as I kept him informed about the volume of essays on *Call It Sleep* that I was editing and about events in Israel. Shortly after his death, however, I received a call from an Israeli publisher asking me to set up a convenient time for delivery of the manuscript. "What manuscript?" I asked. "We thought you knew," was the reply. "Henry Roth stipulated that you look over and

approve the Hebrew translation of *Mercy of a Rude Stream* before its publication." He had never told me.

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NOTES

1. Douglass wrote three autobiographies: Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself* (Boston, 1845); *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855); *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881).

2. Mary Antin, *The Promised Land* (New York, 1997); Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (Knoxville, 1981); Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams: An Autobiography* (Boston, 1961).

3. Philip Roth, "Eli, the Fanatic," in *Goodbye Columbus*; "I Always Wanted You to Admire My Fasting; or Looking at Kafka," in *Reading Myself and Others* (New York, 1976); *The Ghost Writer* (New York, 1979); *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (New York, 1993).

4. Hana Wirth-Nesher, "From Newark to Prague: Roth's Place in the American-Jewish Literary Tradition," in *Reading Philip Roth*, ed. Asher Milbauer and Donald Watson (London, 1988), p. 20.

5. Philip Roth, *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography* (New York, 1988); *Patrimony: A True Story* (New York, 1991).

6. Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography* (Minneapolis, 1989).

7. Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York, 1969). Foreword by François Mauriac.

8. The first three books (already published) of Henry Roth's multivolume work are *Mercy of a Rude Stream* (New York, 1994); *A Diving Rock on the Hudson* (New York, 1995); *From Bondage* (New York, 1996). The second and third books are named volumes 2 and 3 of *Mercy of a Rude Stream*. Volume 4, *Requiem for Harlem*, is due to appear as this essay goes to press.

9. The former theory is expressed by Ruth Wisse in "Classic of Disinheritance," in *New Essays on Call It Sleep*, ed. Hana Wirth-Nesher (New York, 1996), and the latter by Joel Shatzky, based on a letter by David Mandel to the *New York Times*, 13 December 1964.

10. Unpublished interview held in February 1992 in Albuquerque.

11. "As long as I lived on Ninth Street, in the Lower East Side, I thought I was in a kind of ministate of our own. It never occurred to me that the world could be any different," wrote Roth in *Shifting Landscape*, ed. Maria Materassi (Philadelphia, 1987), p. 66.

According to Materassi, "Many a time, in his conversations, he has insisted that he compounded the East Side with Harlem, creating an American microcosm and placing it in the middle of what he has repeatedly referred to in his interviews and in *Mercy* as a kind of 'Jewish ministate.'" "Roth's Shifting Urbanscape," in *New Essays on Call It Sleep*, p. 42.

12. In Lacanian terms, both Hebrew and Yiddish, as all other languages, are associated with the Symbolic and the Law of the Father. But in this novel, Yiddish is associated with the maternal bond.

13. See my essay "Between Mother Tongue and Native Language: Multilingualism in Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*," *Prooftexts* 10 (1990): 297-312. Reprinted as the afterword to *Call It Sleep* (New York, 1991).

14. In the third volume, *From Bondage*, Roth writes in one of the interludes, "he clung all the more loyally to the midwife of his rebirth: Israel. His people were Israel" (p. 69).

15. Leigh Gilmore, "Policing Truth: Confession, Gender, and Autobiographical Authority," in *Autobiography and Postmodernism* (Amherst, 1994), p. 57.

16. Gilmore, p. 69.

