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## The Artist Tales of Philip Roth

THE FICTION OF PHILIP ROTH, more than that of any other Jewish American writer, has been intertwined with his readers' responses to his work, with justification of his themes and methods, with literary theory, and with his Jewish identity. Beginning with the publication of *Goodbye Columbus* in 1959, his satire of Jewish suburbia, and reaching sensational proportions with the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint* in 1969, the controversy about Roth's status, both as artist and as a Jew, has not abated. Roth's talent, according to Irving Howe, "has been put to the service of a creative vision deeply marred by vulgarity." Howe's criticism of Roth is based on his discerning in his writings an "unfocused hostility" stemming from his "thin personal culture." In other words, Roth "comes at the end of a tradition which can no longer nourish his imagination."<sup>1</sup> In short, Roth assaults American Jewish life in his satires without being generally nourished or sustained by the culture which he chooses as his central subject. Thus, the critical observation is also an ethical indictment. Roth vulgarizes Jewish life in his fiction. Marie Syrkin has gone so far as to say that Roth's fiction is "plain vicious" and that it feeds on the crudest stereotypes of antisemitic lore.<sup>2</sup>

Roth has responded to the accusations that he shows contempt for Jewish life both directly in his several essays and indirectly in his fiction. As early as 1961, Roth defended his own writing against accusations of "self-hatred," by identifying their source as the sentimental desire on the part of the American community for a new cultural hero, the fighter Jew, as depicted in works such as Leon Uris's *Exodus*. The fighter Jew writes Roth, is merely "Swapping one simplification for another."<sup>3</sup> Two years later he clarified his argument by insisting that his attackers confuse art and life. The search for a "balanced portrayal," which his critics vainly seek in his fiction, Roth relegates to the level of absurdity. Great

novels, he insists, are not accurate sociological studies. Moreover, behind this plea for a "balanced portrayal" of Jewish life Roth detects timidity and paranoia. Because many of his Jewish readers are unable to separate art from life and because they are also timid and paranoid as Jews in a non-Jewish society, they misread Roth, and what's more, permit bigotry, real or imagined, to determine their response to art. Roth sees himself as being unfairly cast in the role of the informer. Most recently, Roth has been even more specific. The post-Holocaust Jew has been identified in American fiction "with righteousness and restraint, with the just and measured response rather than with those libidinous and aggressive activities that border on the socially acceptable and may even constitute criminal transgression."<sup>4</sup> Roth has been ostracized for depicting "A just-ing Jew. A Jew as a sexual defiler." Libidinous adventures are not for Jews, for contemporary Jewish American literature, of which he finds Bellow to be the best example, has been based on the following truism: "Renunciation is Jewish."<sup>5</sup> As a result of prescriptions as to what constitutes being a Jew Roth concludes "that the task for the Jewish novelist has not been to go forth to forge in the smithy of his soul the uncreated conscience of his race, but to find inspiration in a conscience that has been created and undone a hundred times over in this century alone."<sup>6</sup> In these essays, Roth's self-portrait is that of the artist unfettered by social restraints and collective anxieties, and often misunderstood by readers fettered by their insecurity in Gentile society and by simplistic sociological approaches to literature.

Were the issue of Roth's loyalty or disloyalty to his people limited to a discursive tug of war between the writer and his critics, his career would pose interesting questions in the sociology of literature alone. But the drama between the Jewish writer bent on freely expressing his desires in his art and his moralistic family, friends, and readers has infiltrated his fiction and gradually has become his central subject, his characters, and his plot. The solely sexual drives of his earlier protagonists evolve into artistic longings, sensual pleasure alone evolves into a devotion to art for its own sake, uninhibited by social, ethical, or historical restraints. As Ruth Wisse has observed, "where the early heroes demonstrated their opposition to embourgeoisement by searching for sexual pleasure, their late counterparts pursue a more substantial form of self-realization through artistic creation."<sup>6</sup> I do not believe, however, as Wisse does, that this reflects the recycling of an old theme into a stereotype that lacks the vigor of the original, that he is merely making the bourgeois Jew an easier and more automatic target of ridicule now than his protagonist is an artist. On the contrary. As his art begins to turn in upon itself, it also seems to be moving toward a stronger and more complex identification with Jewish life.

The first evidence of this complexity can be found in *The Professor of Desire* where David Kepesh, the protagonist metamorphosed into a female

least in Roth's earlier novel, *The Breast*, reappears as a writer who has abandoned youthful erotic adventures for a life of quiet dedication to literature and to peaceful permanence with one woman. Jewishness as renunciation, the theme which Roth identifies as the mainstream of Jewish-American literature, is a central aspect of this work. Moreover, the cast of characters has not changed from those of his other works—the fantastic Gentle seductress, the guilt inducing Jewish parents, the sex-starved young man. Yet the changes and additions are worth attending to. First, there are David's parents, the owners of the fading Hungarian Royale hotel in the Catskills, who are depicted comically and tenderly. Kephesh's response to his mother's impending death is especially moving.

God, remember me and the two of you and the little Dodge back before the war . . . [sic] and then, when they are smiling, I will take off my robe and crawl into bed between them. And before she dies, we will all hold each other through one last night and morning. Who will ever know, aside from Klingner, and why should I care what he or anyone makes of it?

And while drawing on the same stereotype of the Jewish mother, Roth's portrait is far more complex than his previous ones—we are shown a capable woman grown irritable after leaving her beloved career as a typist to help her husband manage a hotel. After her funeral, when Kephesh carries out the shopping bag of frozen food that she prepared for him before her death, he is moved by her neat typewritten labels: "Tongue with Grandma's famous raisin sauce—2 portions" (110).

Secondly, there is the introduction of Kafka into the novel. In contrast to Kephesh's trip to Europe right after college with Swedish companions on a tour of the boundaries of sexual pleasure, Kephesh returns to Europe as a professor of literature with a wholesome and loving young woman from Schenectady, N.Y., named Claire. This time, he is also at a literature conference in Europe to read a paper on Kafka's spiritual starvation and to make a pilgrimage to Kafka's Prague. He has two guides representing two dimensions of Kafka's work: a politically oppressed intellectual, expelled from the university and secretly translating *Moby Dick* into Czech and an orthodox Jewish woman who admits tourists to the old cemetery. Thus, the alienation of Kafka as both Jew and intellectual is drawn attention to first. But Kephesh, true to Roth's world view, also sees Kafka's work as a result of sexual blockage—the artistic sublimation of the impotent. Having himself been rescued from impotence by Claire, Kephesh identifies with Kafka and after his visit to the writer's grave he says, "the past can't do me any more harm" (169). To be released of the burden of history by confronting it, such is Kephesh's continuous desire, the triumph of the therapeutic. In a dream sequence after paying homage to Kafka at the cemetery, Kephesh pays homage to Kafka's imaginary liberator—his whore. It would seem that Kephesh's primary identification with Kafka is actually with his erotic life, with his

self-denial, with his self-imposed starvation. For Kephesh, the pilgrimag to Prague is to Jewishness as renunciation, and to this he does pay homage. Only in his dreams does his unconscious mock his sober piety to Kafka.

While at Kafka's grave, Kephesh is struck by the fate of Eastern European Jewry, by the incalculable losses of the Holocaust. It is Kafka who has brought him to this realization. At the novel's end, in a pastoral scene, dinner in the country with Kephesh's father and Claire, Roth introduces a new character and a new dimension to the book—Mr. Barbatnik, a Holocaust survivor. His desire to live despite his searing losses is the penultimate scene of the work—and he inspires those around him. The book ends in a Chekhovian moment of ambiguous longing (Kephesh has been writing about Chekhov that blissful summer with Claire), as he simultaneously laments and dreads the gradual death of his desire for Claire and the inevitable death of his father and Barbatnik, who are at that moment tucked into their tenderly made beds. As he makes love to Claire he fears "dreadful sounds" from their rooms.

Apart from the social backdrop of Kephesh's parents and their clients at the Hungarian Royale Hotel, the only significant Jewish aspects of the novel are the introduction of Kafka and Mr. Barbatnik as reminders of awesome and unthinkable oppression, internal and external. That Barbatnik still desires at all makes him a hero in Roth's world; that Kafka appears as an emblem of the consequences of inordinate repression of desire, one cause being artistic genius, is an interesting forerunner of turning to the Holocaust survivor and to the diaspora writer whose paranoia was vindicated by the nightmare of history for the identifiable Jewish elements in his work is in keeping with the American Jewish community's tendency to derive its collective identity from the Holocaust. In *Professor of Desire*, this is not consciously examined. In *The Ghost Writer*, it becomes the central disturbing and moving subject.

In *The Ghost Writer*, Roth's fiction has completely turned in upon itself in a very intricate and elegant way. Nathan Zuckerman, a young writer from Newark, has earned the condemnation of his family for having written a work of fiction based on a family scandal concerning Meema Chaya's will. His last glimpse of his father as he leaves home is that of a bewildered man, "alone on the darkening street-corner by the park that used to be our paradise, thinking himself and all of Jewry gratuitously disgraced and jeopardized by my inexplicable betrayal." Nathan "Daedalus," as one of the chapter headings boldly alludes to Joyce, is in the process of severing ties with his family and community, and in search of a spiritual father who can aid him in his quest as an artist. The book opens with the mature writer recounting his visit as a novice twenty years before, to his literary idol, E. I. Lonoff, a cross between Bernard Malamud and Isaac Bashevis Singer. Lonoff and his

self-sacrificing wife Hope lead isolated lives in a country home in New England where Lonoff writes almost every working moment, except for two afternoons a week when he teaches literature at a small college nearby. To Zuckerman's surprise, one of Lonoff's students, a beautiful young woman named Amy Bellette, has mysteriously become an intimate member of the household—indeed, how intimate is what Zuckerman would like to know. His fantasies about Amy make up a story within the story and those fantasies contribute to the same self-referential theme—the young artist who must vindicate his life and art before his family and community.

Based on a few snatches of conversation which Zuckerman overhears between Amy and Lonoff from her upstairs bedroom, he imagines that she is really Anne Frank, a fact known only to Lonoff, and that she is in love with him. The American Jew's fascination with the Holocaust and his complex attitude toward it are embodied in the introduction of this metafictional character, the invention of the artist-protagonist. Nathan entertains two significant fantasies about her:

1. That Anne Frank, learning of her father's survival and the publication of her diary by a chance reading of *Time*, chooses not to be reunited with him because she is convinced that knowledge of her survival would diminish the power of her art and the message it brings to the world. She has drawn this conclusion from sitting in the midst of a weeping matinee crowd at a Broadway performance of *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

2. That Amy alias Anne falls in love with Nathan, making it possible for Nathan to be vindicated spectacularly by his family. "I'd like you to meet my wife, the former Anne Frank."

*The Ghost Writer*, then, is a sophisticated and richly structured response to Roth's critics who accuse him of betrayal in that it poses questions about the nature of American Jewish identity through a tale about the nature of art and life. Just as Roth has deliberately projected his own problems onto Nathan, Nathan has projected his own wishes and identity onto Anne/Amy. Nathan imagines that Amy is Anne in order to be reconciled with his own father. But he also identifies with Anne for she is an artist who has willingly sacrificed her own bond with her father for the sake of her art. Thus, Amy is the paragon of both Jewish suffering and of renunciation in the holy altar of art. She is both artist and Jewish saint. If Nathan married her, he would become an accomplice in her secret scheme to preserve the memory of the Holocaust for readers like his own parents, while they, ironically, could still consider him a traitor to the Jewish community. (Indeed, his family's friends have urged Nathan to attend *The Diary of Anne Frank* as a possible cure for his malevolent indifference to Jewish suffering.)

Both Nathan and Anne, in his fantasy, are artists sacrificing personal happiness for their art, except that Anne's art is seen as holy in his community and his as profane. And both Nathan and Anne seek a new father in Lonoff. In the scene that Nathan overhears, she calls Lonoff "Dad-da." Yet with this parallel fate of his alter ego (and reconciliation with himself—if he's in the same plight as Anne Frank, how bad can he be?), Roth has not finished with his exploration of the art and life theme. For Lonoff, the object of both Amy's and Nathan's love because of his art, comforts Amy by subordinating his achievements to hers, "Well, then, you have left my poor art far behind," while secretly believing that she has deluded herself into believing that she is the heroine of a melodrama for the sake of winning the love of an artist—in short, that his art, far from being subordinate, has precipitated the entire drama. If Amy isn't Anne, but is deluded into thinking that she is for the purpose of gaining Lonoff's love, then she is using the myth of Anne the saint to gain her own ends, even if unconsciously. This, of course, is exactly what Nathan Zuckerman does. In his fantasy he uses Anne Frank, who has become the symbol of innocence engulfed by evil, and more specifically of the tenderest shoot of Jewish life exterminated by the Nazis, in order to regain the acceptance of the Jewish community offended by his art. It is as if Roth is suggesting that the path to righteousness within the modern Jewish community is through association with the Holocaust, as it has become a source of holiness for that community. We never know within Nathan's fiction about Amy whether she really is Anne or not, nor do we ever know, in Roth's fiction about Nathan, what Amy's relationship is with Lonoff. All of these ambiguities are in keeping with another dimension of his novel—its affinity to James's artist tales.

Nathan's reading the night that he overhears that suggestive conversation is Henry James's "The Middle Years," a classic example of the Jamesian artist tale in which a character, convinced that the meaning of life is derived from art, renounces his former life and a lavish inheritance for the sake of an artist whom he reveres, only to discover that the artist does not consider his art to be a success with the sole exception of having inspired such a renunciation. In James's artist tales, such as "The Lesson of the Master," "The Figure in the Carpet," and "The Middle Years," "obscure" as a stylistic device is also subject, the enigma at the heart of life expressed by those most sensitive to the problematics of perception—artists. Todorov is right in seeing the quest for an absolute and absent cause as the basis of Jamesian narration,<sup>9</sup> particularly in the artist tale, where epistemological questions, never satisfactorily resolved, are the very substance of the works. Furthermore, and here the influence on Roth is most pronounced, the quest of artists and critics to shape realities, to invest perceptions with meaning, to understand each other's signs, becomes a moral predicament. Does the young man in "The Author of Beltramo" contribute to the death of his mentor's child merely by his

kaggerated reverence for art? Does the critic's naive search for meanings beneath form result in the betrayal of friends and lovers in "The Figure in the Carpet"? Is there really a figure in the carpet at all beyond the quest for such a figure? Is the search for one absolute figure the worst kind of renunciation of life? In James's tales, epistemological questions are always intertwined with moral issues, so that the reader is presented with a series of dilemmas about the value of life without art and art without life.

*The Ghost Writer*, in setting and in plot, is a clear and obvious use of the artist tale—the novice writer, visiting the home of his artistic mentor, becomes an observer and finally a participant in the artist's private life, which disturbs him deeply and leaves him baffled about what is fiction and what is not.

Roth's work operates on the same principle as those of James's artist tales, with the added dimension of a quest for a meaningful and moral Jewish identity. First of all, who is the ghost writer? Is Amy really Anne Frank, the ghostly unknown living author of her own diary? Is Nathan the ghost writer of Amy's story? Is Nathan Roth's ghost writer, in that he writes the story of Roth's own artistic and ethical dilemmas? These are, indeed, the type of ghosts of which Henry James was very fond. If a ghost writer is the genuine but unacknowledged voice behind the assumed voice of the author, then is Roth the ghost writer for Nathan and is the audience taken in by assuming that Nathan speaks for Roth? Is Roth satirizing Nathan's fantasies about Anne Frank? Is he criticizing him for sacrificing any person and any idea before the altar of his own neuroses? Are ghost writers the inevitable outcome of readers who cannot perceive ironically? Is this Roth's Jamesian plea to his readers to be more imaginative in their search for the figure in his carpet?

As Roth implies in this novel, Anne Frank is the kind of ghost of which American Jewish readers are very fond. Philip Roth took a great risk in incorporating his image of Anne Frank into his work, for the "use" of any Holocaust figure to enlist automatic sympathy and to charge emotionally what appear to be unrelated topics can easily become vulgar. This doesn't happen in *The Ghost Writer* because Roth is analyzing the very circumstances of such fantasies and their ethical implications. Roth raises the very complex issue of the morality of using the Holocaust, a symbol of collective trauma, as a social tool, to bludgeon the Jewish artist into restraining his imagination for the sake of "the common good," or as an artistic tool to evoke sympathy from a critical audience by offering up one of its most sacred subjects. In so doing, he has given us a Jewish version of one of the major strains of modernism, the centrality of art.

His most recent book, *Zuckerman Unbound*, is a sequel to *The Ghost Writer* and to the unfolding autobiographical drama of Roth's writing career. Having published an erotic book entitled *Carnovsky*, Nathan

Zuckerman now faces the ordeal of fame, as he soars to stardom enshrined in gossip columns and talk shows. The parallel with Roth's *Complaint* is evident to any reader even remotely familiar with Roth's work. By satirizing the absurd media hype around authors and the simplistic autobiographical conclusions drawn by readers while also including thinly veiled autobiographical elements (such as the notoriety and outrage caused by *Carnovsky*), Roth once again places the relationship of author and readers at the center of his work. His title with its ironic allusion to Prometheus both elevates and undercuts Zuckerman the artist. Nathan is indeed unbound in this book, from his family, the community, his wife, and finally his childhood memories. The book consists of a series of revisits and confrontations that confirm his broken bonds—first to the apartment he shared with his last wife, a Christian do-gooder opening her home to pacifists, the abandoned elderly, and radical priests; then to his dying father, a compulsive letter writer to politicians about the injustice of the Vietnam war among other causes; and finally to his old neighborhood in Newark, where, in an armored limousine he sees the poverty and urban decay that have supplanted the lyrical cityscape of his childhood that he had poured into his novel. Looking at the boarded houses and remembering his father's funeral several days before, he concludes: "You are no longer any man's son, you are no longer some good woman's husband, you are no longer your brother's brother, and you don't come from anywhere, anymore, either." To both his Christian wife and his Jewish father, he is a hedonist, delinquent in his social responsibilities. After his father's funeral his brother Henry, the "good" son with a flourishing dental practice, wife, children, and house in the suburbs, sums up the accusations against Nathan: "What does loyalty mean to you? What does responsibility mean to you? What does self-denial mean, *restraint*—anything at all? To you everything is disposable! Everything is *exposable!* Jewish morality, Jewish endurance, Jewish wisdom, Jewish family—everything is grist for your fun machine."<sup>10</sup>

As in the earlier two books, betrayal is a major theme in this work. In addition to the venomous mail that Nathan receives regularly reminding him that his novel has betrayed the Jewish community, his brother accuses him of having betrayed his father and actually killing him with his writing. The fatal heart attack, Henry insists, followed his reading of *Carnovsky*. Nathan's defense throughout the book is a formal-istic one—authors and narrators aren't the same people and against literary unsophistication Nathan has no weapons. In fact, in what would read as a defense of *Portnoy's Complaint*, Nathan reminds his mother that she is not Mrs. Carnovsky, no matter how insistent readers may be in identifying her. "You and I know that it was very nearly heaven thirty years ago," he tells her. While he maintains his right to complete artistic freedom, he continually punishes himself for what could be the consequences of his art, for what could finally be a betrayal. Nathan fears



that his success as a writer of erotic fiction could be the cause of his mother's being kidnapped (he receives phone calls threatening this crime) and his guilt convinces him that his father's last word on his deathbed was "Bastard" and was directed at him.

The deathbed scene distills Nathan's and Roth's concerns compellingly. Nathan wants to console his father by enlarging his frame of reference, by leading him from the social to the cosmic, just as Roth has persisted in guiding his readers away from the Jewish social implications of his work toward general artistic and formal appreciation. But theories about an ever-expanding universe, patiently explained by his prodigal son, are no comfort to Victor Zuckerman; he would rather hear Cousin Essie reminisce about his grandmother's mandel bread. What is familiar warmth for his father is tribal bondage for Nathan; what is transcendent knowledge for Nathan is estranged nonsense to the elder Zuckerman. Nathan suffers in part because he sees his alternatives in such stark either-or terms. As does Roth, it seems, in his elaboration of his art and life theme in this book, for the only alternative Nathan perceives and readily dismisses is the life of his brother Henry—a stereotype of the "good Jewish boy" repressing all of his erotic and artistic desires for the sake of family and community responsibility. What Roth can do so elegantly in *The Ghost Writer*, where he uses heavily charged images and allusions to convey the truly complicated moral and artistic dilemmas faced by his protagonists, he does less skillfully in this sequel. Believing himself to be truly unbound at the end, Nathan, like Stephen Daedalus, is now free to create. But, as Roth and his readers know, Stephen unfettered by family, religion, and nation is not really free to soar. Joyce gave us a sequel to that portrait of the artist, one in which the cosmic flights of Daedalus are grounded with the bond of fatherhood, that offered by Leopold Bloom. Out of Roth's unceasing dialogue with his readers, he has entered a new phase of his career, no less captivating than those first invigorating satires. Now Roth gives us James along with Kabelais, and Prague along with Newark. His latest, more studied works, are engaging in that they turn upon the American Jewish writer's tug of war with his community to invest that self-conscious subject with the modernist inheritance that places the role of art at the center of art itself.

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NOTES

1. Irving Howe, "Philip Roth Reconsidered," *Commentary*, December 1972, p. 73.
2. Marie Syrkin, letter to the Editor of *Commentary*, March 1973.



3. Philip Roth, "Some New Jewish Stereotypes," *Reading Myself and Others* (New York, 1975), p. 127.
4. Philip Roth, "Imagining Jews," *Reading Myself and Others*, p. 201.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 221.
6. Philip Roth, "Professor of Desire (New York, 1977), p. 104.
7. Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer* (New York, 1979), p. 121.
8. Philip Roth, "The Secret of Narrative," *The Poetics of Prose* (Ithaca, 1977).
9. Ivoan Todorov, *Zuckermand Unbound* (New York, 1981), p. 217.
10. Philip Roth, *Zuckermand Unbound* (New York, 1981), p. 217.