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Writing Himself and Others:
Philip Roth and the Autobiographical Tradition in Jewish-American Fiction

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Philip Roth's parody of autobiography in the Zuckerman series is part of a larger debate concerning the problems of Jewish art. As Roth manipulates personal and personified autobiography, he both underlines and undermines Jewish traditions of reading and writing. To be sure, Zuckerman's struggle for artistic identity articulates a long-standing Jewish concern with the tensions of collective representation. It is from a culture consistently threatened by alienation and extermination that Roth finds his terms of reference. Zuckerman and his creator are subject to a whole discourse of Jewish textuality: to Jewish notions about the relationship between the individual and the group, between fact and fiction and between aesthetics and morality.

However, the Zuckerman books are at once part of a continuum of Jewish culture and a unique response to the pressures of contemporary American Judaism. Through his humorous manipulations of autobiographical fiction, Roth finally counter-turns the very compasses by which he has oriented himself. He offers a potent commentary on the fatuity of Jewish "facts" and on the fictitious nature of the collectivized Jewish voice. For Roth, it is not only the Jew's experience, but his/her imagination, his/her individual frame of understanding, that determines ethnic identity. In the end, Roth challenges the cohesion of the Jewish cultural text. He places himself in a house of mirrors, where life and art, self and group, Jewish reverence and Jewish rebellion, endlessly reflect off one another.

* * *

La parodie de l'autobiographie dans la collection Zuckerman, par Philip Roth, s'inscrit dans un débat plus large sur la problématique de l'art juif. En manipulant l'autobiographie personnelle et imaginaire, Roth souligne, tout en les minant, les traditions juives de la lecture et de l'écriture. Il faut voir dans la lutte de Zuckerman pour une identité artistique le reflect d'une hantise juive de longue date: celle de la représentation collective. C'est dans une culture ménacée régulièrement par l'alienation et l'extermination que Roth puise ses termes de référence. Zuckerman, de même que Roth, sont soumis à tout un discours de la textualité juive: une revue approfondie des idées juives sur les rapports entre l'individu et le groupe, le réel et l'imaginaire.. l'aesthétique et la moralité.

Néanmoins, si les livres Zuckerman se situent dans le contexte de la culture juive, ils représentent également une réponse unique aux pressions vécues par les Juifs américains contemporains. Par le biais de l'humour et du roman autobiographique, Roth offre un commentaire profond sur la nature fictive des "faits" juifs et sur la voix "collective" des Juifs. Pour Roth, c'est non seulement l'expérience, mais l'imagination, ou la compréhension individuelle, qui déterminent l'identité ethnique. À la fin, Roth se situe dans une maison de mirroirs, ou se réflètent interminablement l'un sur l'autre la vie et l'art, le moi et le groupe, la vénération et la révolte juive.

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Prologue

In recent years, the role of the minority writer has come to the forefront of literary studies. As minority art has won popular (and political) attention, issues of representation, of the authenticity of the ethnic aesthetic, have come into focus. Truly, the question of ethnicity itself has come under intense "post-modern" scrutiny: ethnographers, historians and literary critics have all begun to challenge "essentialist" concepts of ethnicity. As Michael Fischer explains, "Ethnicity is not something that is simply passed on from generation to generation, taught and learned; it something dynamic, often unsuccessfully repressed or avoided" (192). Today, ethnicity is held to be a construction or invention. It undergoes constant transformation, re-negotiation, and even desecration. Ethnicity is approached as a theoretical, as well as a thematic issue.

Certainly, I hold similarly "post-modern" assumptions about ethnicity. Like Roth himself, I am interested in the role of the imagination in the creation of ethnicity--in literature as in life. However, while this perspective is my starting point (and Roth's end point), I ultimately wish to trace a *continuum* of ethnic inventions. If ethnicity is constructed, it is not only built from outside the ethnic group, but from firm foundations within ethnic communities themselves. Ethnicity is as much a communal and personal conception, a product of a specific history, as it is an epistemological concern. Jewishness is defined, not simply by objective philosophy, but by Jews themselves.

My goal is to explore how Jews think about Judaism, how Jewishness (as opposed to ethnicity in general or identity in universal terms) has been theorized from within the Jewish community itself. By looking at the conventions and customs of those Jews who

emigrated to the United States from Eastern Europe, by examining Ashkenazi traditions, I hope to discover the patterns by which Jews have formulated group identity. I wish to discern how Jews affiliate themselves to one another; how they place themselves in historical context; and, finally, the means by which Jews have expressed their ethnic identity in art.

At heart, my project is to trace the Jewish trajectories which culminate in Roth's writing and reception. I believe that it is through a careful consideration of Jews' notions about Jewishness that Roth's work, in particular his Zuckerman collection, can be best understood. Following such writers as Allen Guttman and Mark Shechner, I wish to situate Roth in terms of both his continuities and discontinuities with a Jewish heritage, in terms of both his descent and dissent from Jewish cultural principles.

In order to investigate Roth's complicated relationship to Jewish life and letters, this thesis will focus primarily on the question of Roth's autobiographical parody. By examining why Roth adopts an apparent mask of autobiography in the Zuckerman books, by exploring the meaning behind Roth's manipulation of personal and personified details, I hope to prove that it is through his seemingly contradictory obsessions with the autonomous individual and the cultural spokesman, through his endless variations on the self, that Roth actually situates himself in a collective Jewish context. It is in Roth's autobiographical humour that he simultaneously underlines and undermines certain conventions of Jewish identification and textualization. Indeed, the autobiographical parody is Roth's medium for responding to and revising the assumptions which have informed his proponents and detractors alike. It is *Roth's* vehicle for inquiring how Jews

think and re-think their Judaism.

To begin with, I am interested in how Roth's autobiographical parody highlights certain issues characteristic of the Jewish literary endeavour. Where many of Roth's critics and readers have understood his work in autobiographical terms, as an articulation of collective, extra-literary Jewish facts in fictional guise, I wish to show how Roth's play on autobiography works to outline the conventions behind such a Jewish reception. Why have Jewish readers insisted on Roth's connection to collective expressive conventions? In what ways do Jewish readers project onto the Jewish story their concerns about group representation and textual identification? In the first section of this thesis I will provide a brief history of Jewish textuality in order to show how the issues raised in Roth's autobiographical play place his writing amidst a larger Jewish continuum of thought about ethnic identity and art. I aim to illustrate how the Jews' heritage as a homeless and persecuted people has forged a particular identification with the text as a locus of ethnic documentation and affirmation.

In section two of this project, various modes of mediating the Jewish textual inheritance in America will be investigated. Undoubtedly, while the Jews' history created a textual container for group confirmation, the dimensions of this expressive vessel underwent profound changes in American steerage. In the United States, Jews were confronted with ideas of emancipation and individuality. For Roth's American forefathers, the stage of the United States entertained a novel conception of an American Self, of a Jew set apart from insular Jewish practices and problems. Thus, the Jewish autobiographical impulse took on new significance as Roth's immediate literary

predecessors dealt with the pressures between the self and the group in the Jewish story. Truly, a Jewish aesthetic, distinct from Jewish moral imperatives or collective issues, was developed in second generation American writing. Through a survey of some of the struggles of the American-Jewish writer, both Roth's attitude toward the artistic self and his own position in relation to the Jewish textual tradition will be revealed. As we shall see, for Roth's generation of writers, it is the *Jewish* Self, an identity differentiated from national or artistic norms, that will provide the greatest literary challenge. In the wake of extermination and assimilation, the American-Jewish writer will need to amend the Jewish text to fit altered Jewish circumstances.

Having displayed how the concerns stimulated by Roth's autobiographical parody speak to a wider Jewish discourse of reading and writing, section three of this study will probe how Roth himself approaches the Jewish text. Here, I am interested in Roth's methods of theorizing Jewish identity and art. Without rejecting his cultural background, what kinds of traditions can Roth draw from to re-create and revise the contemporary Jewish story? Are there alternative conventions of Jewish thought which might grant Roth's generation of writers with a viable means of textual identification? Although many readers have been sensitive to Roth's satiric jabs at Jewish culture, I wish to show that it is in his humorous doubts about Jewish identity that Roth finds a means of re-connecting to Jewish textuality. In challenging the Jewish story, Roth seems to confirm his ethnic heritage. However non-conformist, Roth's stretching of Jewish facts, his questioning of the Jewish collective and Jewish history serve to strengthen his cultural ties. Finally, Roth's autobiographical parody becomes a mode, not only of accenting the

Jews' assumptions about the Jewish story, but for reconsidering the ways in which Jewish textuality and identity might be articulated.

Certainly, the Jewish literary traditions of factuality and collectivity emphasized by Roth's autobiographical parody are carried forward in the Zuckerman books as a means of arguing against reductive notions of Jewishness. In Section four, I will explore how Roth's use of Holocaust material, his presentation of an encounter between Zuckerman and Anne Frank, for instance, can be read as a commentary on the consequences of the Jewish story's extra-literary function. Where Jewish customs insist on the factual importance of the Jewish text, Roth's maneuvering of the Holocaust script posits that, in fact, the imagination is a vital technique for maintaining Jewish continuity. Like his autobiographical parody, Roth's use of Holocaust details blurs the line between fact and fiction in an effort to show how the artistic task is not only the recording, but the construction of a Jewish "reality" in the text. Roth's Holocaust text protests holistic notions of a Jewish heritage: as Zuckerman comes to understand the Holocaust in his own terms, Roth implies that no single line of Jewish history can be found. Each of us, through our own imaginations and our own projections, are party to the creation the Jewish cultural text.

In addition to re-formulating Jewish "factual" or "historical" identification in the text, Roth challenges the collectivity of the Jewish story. Where Roth's autobiographical trope explores the interplay between the individual and the group in Jewish writing, his extended look at the contemporary Jew's search for identity acts to refute simplistic ideas of an essential, communal Jewishness. In section five I will demonstrate how Roth

questions what joins us to an ethnic grouping. I wish to show that, as we are presented with the varying cultural identities of the Zuckerman brothers--in Israel, Prague and America---Roth problematizes the totalization of **the** Jewish self. Parallel to the way imagination and individuality play a part in the construction of the Jewish past, Roth suggests that it is the specificity of the Jew, and not any static formulas of Jewish identification, that provides the link between the Jewish self and the Jewish community. For Roth, the Jewish text can never be the expression of just one voice. Particularly for the post-Holocaust Jew, whose cultural touchstones have been erased, the "I," the individual experience, must work as a filter, and not a block, to Jewish affiliation.

Ultimately, I aim to establish how Roth's autobiographical parody is both an acknowledgement of Jewish textual traditions and a challenge to the cohesiveness of those conventions. Roth's use of personal details is less a reckless exposure of private facts than a form of parodic enquiry into the ways Jews have and might continue to express Jewishness in the text. For Roth, the Jewish self articulated in the text is neither a rejection of cultural constraints nor a retreat into an isolated individualism. Instead, Roth's mock(ing) autobiographical fiction asserts that the Jewish self and the Jewish group, Jewish "fact" and Jewish "fancy" are engaged in an endless, decidedly generative, exchange. Out of Roth's comic stretching of Jewish practices and potential, out of Roth's humorous play on autobiographical themes, comes a dynamic assertion of Jewish identity.

Introduction

Since his first collection of short stories, *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959), Philip Roth's career has been marked by Jewish polemic: raising the eyebrows (and ire) of rabbis and literary priests alike. Roth's work has come under intense in-group attack for its presentation of Jewish-American life. Certainly, a brief look at Roth's reviews confirms that "Neutral criticism. . . hardly exists where Roth is concerned. His readers have strong attachments to one end or the other of the evaluative yardstick: they either love his work or they hate it" (Pinsker, *Critical Essays* 3). Such a spectacular polarization in Roth's reception suggests the power of his literary achievement. The parodic excesses and pungent critiques of Roth's novels have rendered him, in Irving Howe's disdainful words, "a cultural 'case'" (Howe, "Roth Reconsidered" 229). The sheer attention granted Roth is "proof in the form of outrage that his work" strikes a "nerve" (Wisse, "Then and Now" 56). As Clifford Geertz posits, "cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete. . . what gets better is the precision with which we vex each other" (29). Roth's work offers only one register of Jewish-American reality; nonetheless, it is a valuable Richter scale for a myriad of Jewish opinions.

Undoubtedly, as one factor in the factional Jewish literary scene, Roth's writing has occasioned intense reverberations. While launched from small-circulation magazines and quiet campuses, critics have vehemently attacked Roth in gestures sometimes indistinguishable from "gang warfare" (Shechner, *Revolution* 3). As Mark Shechner explains, "it is plain that there are issues aplenty" in Jewish-American letters "to pit Jews against Jews in sharp moral combat" (*Revolution* 3). Truly, despite his moll-of-the-

minute's protestations. Zuckerman's participation in a "petty little ghetto quarrel" with Milton Appel in *The Anatomy Lesson* (*AL*) draws from the kind of hair-splitting, hair-raising skirmishes of Roth's own literary experiences (*AL* 100). The playful irreverence and erotic ethnicity of works such as *Portnoy's Complaint* (*PC*) outraged many of Roth's peers, who saw his confessional comedy as dangerous satire, even anti-Semitic betrayal. Like Zuckerman and Sisovsky, Roth's "satirical smile" was unbearable for those Jewish critics devoted to "ideological fanaticism" (*Prague Orgy* 704). Marie Syrkin, for example, declared that "there is little to choose between [Goebbel's] and Roth's interpretation of what animates Portnoy. . . Within the trappings of the old-hat Jewish joke lurks a savage anti-Jewish stereotype, even more old-hat, and not at all funny" ("Self-Abuse" 65/68). Similarly, Irving Howe's landmark essay, "Philip Roth Reconsidered," maintained that *Portnoy's Complaint*

> signalled an end to philo-Semitism in American culture; one no longer had to listen to all that talk about Jewish morality, Jewish endurance, Jewish wisdom, Jewish families. Here was Philip Roth himself. . . confirming what had always been suspected about those immigrant Jews but had recently not been tactful to say. (243)

Syrkin and Howe, like the sententious Appel, were not laughing at Roth's bad-boy antics. In fact, Roth's vindictive portrayal of Appel is a cruel composite of the arch-critic, a last jab at his detractors.

While the serious approbation of Roth's critics seems overblown, some explanation for their distaste can be found in their insistence on understanding Portnoy

as Roth's personal mouthpiece. For many, the punch to Roth's punch-line was its sheer verisimilitude. Syrkin notes, "When so much is superficially accurate, what could be false?" ("Self-Abuse" 64) Portnoy's cry to his people to "stick [their] suffering rage up [their] suffering ass[es]" was interpreted as a message from the maestro himself (*PC* 84). Howe writes,

> . . . who can doubt that Portnoy's cry from the heart--enough of Jewish guilt, enough of the burdens of history, enough of inhibition and repression, it is time to 'let go' and soar to the horizons of pleasure--speaks in some sense for Roth? ("Roth Reconsidered" 240)

Essentially, the blasphemy of Roth's book was its apparent honesty. What was intended as "a novel in the guise of a confession was received and judged by any number of readers as a confession in the guise of a novel" (Roth, "Imagining" 218).[1] Portnoy's wish to escape the vicissitudes of Jewish vice were read by his adversaries as veiled expressions of a writer whose Jewish "umbilical cord" had been torn "with such violence that the clinical details of the rupture obscure[d] every other element" (Syrkin, "Jewish Awareness" 225). Roth seemed to go against every grain of Jewish tradition, against "social, ethical and historical restraints" (Rubin-Dornsky 175). Ultimately, Roth's critics dismissed him as a writer who'd given up Jewish readers for a decidedly low-brow audience (Howe, "Roth Reconsidered" 244).

Yet, however Roth had "abandoned" his Jewish readers, his Jewish readers had

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[1] In Roth's novel *Deception*, the craftily named "Philip Roth" cries: "I write fiction and I'm told it's 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" (190).

not abandoned him. Popular responses to *Goodbye, Columbus* and *Portnoy's Complaint* were as widespread and far-out as their critical counterparts. In a Reform Rabbis' journal, for instance, a Rabbi writes, "the only conclusion any intelligent reader could draw from [Roth's] stories or books is that the country--nay the world--would be a much better and happier place without 'Jews'" (qtd. in Isaac, "Defending Roth" 182). Likewise, one of the letters Roth received on "Defender of the Faith" holds that he had "done as much harm as all the anti-Semitic organizations have done to make people believe that all Jews are cheats, liars, [and] connivers" (Roth, "Writing" 160).[2] Ostensibly, in Roth's work, no Jews were good Jews. Of course, as Roth admits, painful as such in-group griping could be, his reader responses were a vital learning experience,

> . . . this conflict with my Jewish critics was as valuable a struggle as I could have had at the outset of my career. For one thing, it yanked me, screaming, out of the classroom; all one's readers, it turned out, weren't New Critics sitting on their cans at Kenyon. Some people out there took what one wrote to *heart*. . . ("Great American Novel" 78)

Literary aspirations aside, Roth's novels propelled him into a distinctly public discourse.

At base, the discourse of Roth's reading community revolved around issues of Jewish image and identity. Roth's novels entered an on-going dialogue concerning the presentation and participation of Jews in American society. Where Roth portrayed Jews

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[2] Zuckerman, of course, endures similarly scathing reactions from his fellow-Jews. In *Zuckerman Unbound* (*ZU*) Roth writes:

> Plenty of people had already written to tell him off. 'For depicting Jews in a peepshow atmosphere of total perversion, for depicting Jews in acts of adultery, exhibitionism, masturbation, sodomy, fetishism, and whoremongery. Somebody with letterhead as impressive as the President's had even suggested that he 'ought to be shot.' (16)

fighting over money or having affairs, or--outrageously--as analysands "shooting off [their] mouth[s] about shooting off [their] semen" (Roth, "Imagining" 22).

> only 5000 days after Buchenwald and Auschwitz it was asking a great deal of people still frozen in horror by the Nazi slaughter of European Jewry to consider with ironic detachment, or comic amusement, the internal politics of Jewish life. In some instances, understandably, it was asking the impossible. (Roth "Story" 174)

Tragedy on a massive scale had led American-Jews to a serious consideration of their public image. Still shaking in terror at the witness of European decimation, the question of what people, specifically the *goyim*, might think, overwhelmed the greater Jewish community (Roth, "Writing" 156). As Ruth Wisse explains, "Jews read like scanners crossing a minefield. . . [L]ike actors whose living depends on their success with the critics, they do keep close track of their own reviews" ("Reading" 41).[3]

Finally, Roth's readers--literary and popular--seem to have projected their own sensibilities and sensitivities onto Roth's work. Roth posits that, "Not always, but frequently, what readers have taken to be my disapproval of the lives lived by Jews seems to have more to do with their own moral perspective than with the one they would ascribe to me. . ." (Roth, "Writing" 150). Indeed, in "Writing About Jews" Roth confirms,

> For the record, all the letters I saw that came in about "Defender of the Faith" were from Jews. Not one of those people whose gratitude the

[3] In *The Counterlife* (*CL*), Shuki Elchanan tells Nathan: "American-Jews are tremendously defensive--in a way being defensive *is* American Judaism" (161).

> rabbi believes I earned wrote to say, 'Thank you,' nor was I invited to address any anti-Semitic organizations. When I did receive speaking invitations, they were from Jewish ladies' groups, Jewish community centres, and from all sorts of Jewish organizations, large and small. (168)

From this perspective, Roth's work can be seen as an echo chamber for an active conversation about Jewish identity. If "by its nature, reviewing is a normative process," Roth's reader response reveals as much about his reviewers themselves as about his work (Wallace 21). By examining the "scrimmage" in Jewish-American letters, by following the fall-out of those who presume, like Roth, to speak to (if not for) "the Jewish experience" we find an accurate reflection of the very variability of that experience (Shechner, *Revolution* 3). As Zuckerman concludes: "Here we go again. One Jew is about to explain to another Jew that he is not the same kind of Jew that the first is--the source, this situation, of several hundred thousand jokes, not to mention all the works of fiction" (*CL* 89). Rather than charting simple rebellion against Jewish-American convention, Roth's writing actually works in dynamic dialogue with the Jewish-American tradition.

To be sure, Roth's reception has been as fruitful to his internal dialogue as a writer as it has been to the Jewish community at large. Though acknowledging the frustration of being consistently and vehemently misunderstood, Roth is quick to assign his misreaders with due inspirational credit. In *The Facts* (*TF*), Roth describes his reaction to a speech on ethnic writing he delivered at Yeshiva University:

> Over my pastrami sandwich no less, I said, 'I'll never write about Jews

> again.' Equally ridiculously, I thought that I meant it, or at least that I should. I couldn't see then. . . that the most bruising public exchange of my life constituted not the end of my imagination's involvement with the Jews, let alone an ex-communication, but the real beginning of my thralldom. (129)

Roth's critics have ensured his continuing scrutiny of the Jewish-American subject. In fact, it has been those who roundly rebuke Roth that get his literary indignation in full creative throttle. However unintentionally, it is the misreaders of Roth's writing that strike to the heart of his thematic and stylistic obsessions. As he claims of the more daunting communist critics in Czechoslovakia,

> Though censors may appear to be the most narrow-minded and perverse of all misreaders, at times they may be more discerning about the socially injurious implications of a book than the most tolerantly open-minded audience. (qtd. in Milbauer/Watson 2)

Censors and misreaders invest meaning in an author's work. Misplaced or not, the attention of a censorious audience can force a kind of meritorious bravado from the writer in question. The same doubts that animate the critic come to inspire the author. Through his readers, Roth, like Zuckerman, has learned that "the greatest triumph of the writer is that of wrestling the blessing of one's fiction out of the misfortune of one's character," or, at least, that the character of one's misfortune can be the blessing of one's work (D. Rubin, 44). Roth's "thralldom" with the Jewish predicament recurs in novel after novel, blighted Jewish sons blurring into one another as Zuckerman, Tarnopol and

Kepesh battle with the powers-that-be again and again. It is Roth's "good luck" that his Jewish antagonists urged his "being Jewish by their opposition" (Wirth-Nesher, "Newark to Prague" 23).

Of course, opposition has not been Roth's only link in the Jewish chain of being. While Roth's challengers have strengthened his ties to the Jewish community, Milbauer and Watson point out that it has been "Roth's devotion to roots" which has realized his "flights of imagination and success as a novelist" (16). As Portnoy cries, "Doctor, what should I rid myself of, tell me, the hatred. . . or the love? Because I haven't even begun to mention everything I remember with pleasure--I mean with a rapturous, biting sense of loss!" (*PC* 29) Roth's capacity to play with Jewish particulars is less an indictment of Jews than an example of his confidence in his *landsmen*'s "American security and strength" (Wisse, "Reading," 57). Roth explains:

> Some critics have said that my work furnished 'fuel' for anti-Semitism. I'm sure these charges will be made again--though the fact is (and I think there's even a clue to this in my fiction) that I have always been far more pleased by my good fortune in being born a Jew than my critics may begin to imagine. It's a complicated, interesting, morally demanding, and very singular experience, and I like that. ("Portnoy" 20)

For Roth, Judaism provides a flaming Dedaelian formula, a goad and a mode for artistic activity. The question which vivifies Roth's writing is not one of severing or succumbing to Judaism, but rather one which probes the problem of what to do about being Jewish at all. He asks, "who or what shall have influence and jurisdiction over

one's life?" (Roth, "Great American Novel" 84) Although he claims to write with "no particular group in mind," in fact Roth has developed into a kind of "Jewologist" (Roth, "Portnoy," 17;Roth, *Operation Shylock* 335). Rarely do we get an undiluted sense of a Gentile psyche in Roth's work--instead, Roth remains endlessly preoccupied with the potential of the Jewish theme.

While the Jewish theme animates much of Roth's literary energy, his reception has also effectively turned his work in upon itself. Since his first Zuckerman novel, *My Life as a Man* (*MLM*), Roth's concerns as a Jew have been explored through the framework of the literary vocation. Roth's encounters with Jewish readers have been re-imagined in order to examine the very nature of the Jewish story itself. Roth's Zuckerman novels, including *Zuckerman Bound* and *The Counterlife*, ask: "How should [the Jewish story] be told? In what tone? To whom should it be told? To what end? Should it be told at all?" (qtd. in Lee 243)[4] Naturally, such questions in the Zuckerman works are articulated in characteristically Rothian inflections: it is in parody that Roth's concerns about the Jewish literary endeavour find their voice. Like Portnoy before him, Zuckerman is impelled by mockingly mythic human struggles. As Roth writes,

> I had imagined [the Portnoys] to be 'relatives' living 'upstairs': here were the fallible, oversized, anthropomorphic gods who had reigned over the households of my neighbourhood; here was that legendary Jewish family

[4] Such questions are not confined to Roth's oeuvre. Truly, the question of the "Jewish writer" is one which plagues almost every Jewish author. For helpful sources on Jewish literature see: Hana Wirth-Nesher, What is Jewish Literature, Richard Siegel and Tamar Sofer, The Writer in the Jewish Community, Irving Malin, Contemporary American-Jewish Literature: Critical Essays, and Abraham Chapman, Jewish American Literature: An Anthology of Poetry, Autobiography and Criticism.

> dwelling on high, whose squabbles over French fried potatoes, synagogue attendance, and *shiksas* were, admittedly, of an Olympian magnitude and splendour, but by whose terrifying kitchen lightening storms were illuminated the values, dreams, fears and aspirations by which we mortal Jews lived somewhat less vividly down below. ("That Book" 39)

Zuckerman is less a direct reflection of Roth's Jewish obsession than a refraction of his interests. Essentially, Zuckerman is what Ralph Ellison calls a "critical parody," the interpretation of a subject "from within rather than from without," a form of "literary criticism which consists in heightening the characteristics of the thing imitated" (qtd. in Gates 107). It is through the "distorting dye" of comedy that Roth illuminates the Jewish-American experience (Roth, "Gang" 49). The reader of Roth's latest outrage should look carefully, not only at the new ways in which Roth is behaving badly, but in the new masks he has donned and in their significance (Roth qtd. in Lee 223).

Perhaps the most important of Roth's masks in the Zuckerman books is that of autobiography. If reviewers mistook Portnoy as Roth's larynx, Zuckerman is a devious manipulation of such double-takes. Through what he calls mock or hypothetical autobiography, Roth plays with the relationship between fact and fiction, self and group in the Jewish text (Roth qtd. in Lee 225). Roth's autobiographical parody explores the connection between Jewish readers' extra-textual concerns and the Jewish writer's imaginative privileges. The personal and personified autobiography in the Zuckerman books works to challenge the sanctity (indeed, the sanity) of the "autobiographical pact" in Jewish fiction (qtd. in de Man 923). Roth's use of private, if publicly recognizable,

material is a means of questioning the Jewish reader's insistence on the collective and moral significance of the Jewish story: it is his mode of probing the inherent assumptions of his Jewish readership. In *Zuckerman Bound* and *The Counterlife* autobiography acts as a trope, a "figure of reading" through which Roth can evaluate a whole tradition of reading and writing, and can challenge the union between art and history, aesthetics and morality, individual and community, in the Jewish text (de Man 921). In the Zuckerman trilogy, Roth turns "whole lives, rather than Lonovian sentences, around in order to get to the truth" (Pinsker, "Imagining" 778).

It is from this outlook that the Zuckerman books' role as ethnic epic can be understood. Read figuratively, the private battles of Zuckerman with his family and community stand as synnecdoches for an entire Jewish struggle. As Roth tells us, *Portnoy's Complaint* taught him "to crystallize [his] public feud into the drama of internal family dissent that's the backbone of the Zuckerman stories" (*TF* 117). Zuckerman's attempts to find a comfortable Jewish stance, as both writer and man, is as much a "cultural record as a personal testimony" (Pinsker, "Imagining" 777). Just as the epic is generally associated with ethnogenesis, the emergence of a people, so too, the satiric epic of the Zuckerman books traces the Jewish-American effort to find an ethnic identity (Sollors, *Beyond* 238).[5] Zuckerman expresses both the American-Jew's continuity with his ancestors as well as his chafing ruptures from the past (Guttman *Jewish Writers* 14). Roth's primary regard in the Zuckerman books is that of "thickly" describing a cultural

[5] For a detailed comparison between Roth's Zuckerman books and epic conventions see: Joseph Cohen, 196-204. Also, for an interesting look at ethnic trilogies see William Boelhower's article in Werner Sollors's The Invention of Ethnicity.

context, what Clifford Geertz defines as a method of clarifying those processes of thought, convention and--most importantly--imagination, which constitute a cultural group (14). In Roth's own terms, his "novelistic enterprise. . . might itself be described as imagining Jews *being* imagined, by themselves and by others" ("Imagining" 245). Ultimately, literature becomes Roth's instrument of culture, a tool to think with, as well as about, his ethnicity.

The Law of the Letter: Judaism and The Text

Before exploring Roth's parodic response to his (mis)readers, we must first understand the tradition of Jewish reading behind his reception. Certainly, the Jews' characteristic, if not exclusive, connection to the text, forms an important background to the Zuckerman series. In many respects, Roth's autobiographical parody works to highlight specific practices of Jewish reading. The ways in which Roth mixes fact and fiction, personal and personified details in his autobiographical parody calls attention to the kinds of expectations and experiences we bring to the Jewish text. Where Roth's autobiographical play forces us to ask whether we are reading about "Roth" or "Zuckerman," the "real" Jew or the imagined Jewish character, Roth inspires a self-consciousness about the conventions of the Jewish story. He asks: why have Jews read fiction in factual terms? why does the Jewish text hold such importance for the Jews' group identification?

Assuredly, the Jews' relationship to the text is part of a long history. As Sanford Pinsker notes, Jewish writing is of a piece with a venerable past: "Commentaries on the Torah were less a cottage industry than they were simultaneously an intellectual compulsion" (*Jewish Fiction* ix). The Jews' ethnogenesis begins with the genesis of the book. George Steiner explains,

> In the relation to God which defines the Jew, the concepts of contract and of covenant are not metaphoric. A narrative charter, a *magna carta* and document of insaturation in narrative form, setting out reciprocal rights and obligations as between God and Man, is explicit in *Genesis* and

Exodus. The foundation of elect identity is textual. (8)

Jewish identity is not only recorded by the text but revealed in it (Finkelstein 3). Unlike other religions, where images and rituals manifest the spirit of the divine, for Jews "if God is, it is because he is in the book" (Fredericksen 37).

Such a textual foundation of Jewish faith is largely due to the shifting sands of Jewish culture itself. As a people whose "homelessness constituted their home," the Jews had to develop a portable container for group identity. In exile, "deprived of freedom, deprived of a territory, it was natural that the Jew should take refuge in the book" (Jabes 358). It was out of Yavneh, out of an early site of exile in the face of Roman persecution, that the text as a substitute for Jewish dwelling was cultivated (Ozick, "Yavneh" 35). The Jewish *patrimonie* became the script (Steiner 5). The transmission of Jewish culture became textual. Hence, reading and the word in Jewish life are a form of circumcision, an irreversible inheritance of Jewish identity.[6] Just as Zuckerman acknowledges that circumcision "makes it as clear as can be that you are here and not there, that you are out and not in--also that you are mine and not theirs," the Jewish reader encounters the text as a homecoming, as a specific act of identification with his/her people (Roth, *CL* 323; Steiner 7). The texts of the *Torah* and *Talmud* remain the "indestructible guarantor[s], the 'underwriter[s]' of the Jewish identity" (Steiner 8). For Jews, writing and reading are important ways of experiencing Jewish life (Fredericksen 38). Any thick description of the Jew must be a fundamentally textual effort.

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[6] Interestingly, as Michael Greenstein points out, the Hebrew word *meelah* equates "word and circumcision as homonyms" (62).

Unquestionably, Roth's awareness of the textual Jew plays a vital role in the Zuckerman opus. As Patrick O'Donnell notes, there is a positive "flurry of texts" in the Zuckerman collection: letters, eulogies, recipe cards and knitting instructions, not to mention stories and novels, are everywhere inscribed (366). However, where O'Donnell ties such textual profusion to a post-modern "vertigo," in fact, it is through texts that Zuckerman finds his Jewish footing. In Roth's work, the Jew is distinguished by a decidedly pre-modern text-centredness, by a Jewish obsession with words which links readers and writers alike to a solid Jewish centre (Finkelstein 1). It is Zuckerman's realization of the text as a Jewish homeland which reconnects him to his Jewish past. As he sentimentally recounts,

> What was to betoken a Jewish homeland to an impressionable, emotional nine year old child, highly susceptible to the emblems of pathos. . . were the stories, all the telling and listening to be done, their infinite interest in their own existence, the fascination with their alarming plight, the mining and refining of *tons* of these stories--the national industry of the Jewish homeland, if not the sole means of production (if not the sole source of satisfaction), the construction of narrative out of the exertions of survival. (Roth, *Prague Orgy* 761)

It is through the Jewish story, through Lonoff's immigrant fiction amongst others, that Zuckerman--"college atheist and highbrow-in-training"--revalues his Jewish heritage (*Roth, Ghost Writer* 19). If, like many in the American-Jewish literary congregation, "the library replace[s] the synagogue. . . and the novel [comes] to do service for the

Torah," nonetheless it is fiction which ultimately preserves Jewish character for Zuckerman (Shechner, *Revolution* 47). In Roth, the novel, the act of imagining the Jew in the text, actually *creates* modern Jewish identity (Novak 67).

As a look at the "textual Jew" hints, the Jewish identity created and contained in writing is primarily collective. Allen Guttman affirms that, "[w]hat really matters in the Jewish religion is not the immortality of the individual Jew, but that of the Jewish people" (*Jewish Writing* 9). Jewish belief is founded on a communal faith. Indeed, it takes ten Jews just to practice Jewish prayer: "A Jew is most actively a Jew when there is a quorum of other Jews. Jews in community learn and daven together and look to one another's needs, a collective devotion in the service of the Unity" (Ozick, "Mirrors" 51). Of course, where the Jewish identity manifests itself collectively, the Jewish text takes on group importance. The word in Judaism is a signifier of the communal body. In contrast to other Western traditions, reading and writing in a Jewish context are social and collective activities (Boyarin 155). Jewish writing is a kind of collective cultural investment.[7] The Jewish text is expected to speak to and for a whole group's convictions. In classical Judaism, for example, even an individual memoir "was expected to dwell on the collective or moral significance of the past, not on its personal dimensions" (Roskies 135). While "nobody Irish asked Joyce to write like Tolstoy," Jewish writing demands representativeness and comprehensiveness of vision (Voelker

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[7] In *The Prague Orgy* (*PO*), Roth draws a humorous parallel between the cultural investment of the Jews in their Jewish sons and daughters--those lawyers, doctors and dentists of a mother's dreams--and the communists' expectations of their brothers and sisters. Bolotka tells Zuckerman of his wish to change from law school to Fine Arts: "'I decide I must quit and I enrol at the school of Fine Arts. . . They say I cannot quit. The workers' money is being spent on my education. The workers have invested a year in my future as a lawyer. . .'" (739).

91). Much of the anger raised by Roth/Zuckerman's work has been a result of such a tradition of collectivism. The confessional style of *Portnoy's Complaint/Carnovsky* has been read either as a purposeful mis-representation of the Jewish psyche or a gross display of self-centredness. It is after all, the *wicked* son on Passover who asks, "What is this service to you?" It is the Jew apart that signals rebellion.[8] Like Zuckerman's mother, the Jew is first and foremost a relational being, a "parents' daughter, [a] sister's sister, [a] husband's wife. What else was there?" (Roth, ZU *222).*

Not surprisingly, the collectivity of Judaism, particularly of the Jewish literary text, creates a profound uneasiness. Though the Jewish writer may wish to work autonomously, his/her use of shared cultural material irreparably joins them to a community of reference. As Henry Zuckerman reasons,

> . . . 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 own voracious, voyeuristic using up of all their lives, gets there first but doesn't always get it right. (Roth, *CL* 205).

Whether as a member of a Jewish family or as a part of the larger Jewish collective, the Jewish writer runs the constant risk of social transgression. Getting the Jewish "story" right is a moral, and not simply an aesthetic, concern. Basically, the Jewish writer is a touchstone for general Jewish "decency" and "conscience" (Roth, *PO* 775). Roth states

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[8] In his article, "The Shape of Exile in Philip Roth, or The Part is Always Apart," Martin Tucker posits that "Roth's choice of masturbation as provocation" in *Portnoy's Complaint* is significant in its understanding "of the tribal injunctions against masturbation; the seed going to waste" (37).

that.

> With my Jewish audience I feel intensely their expectations, disdain, delight criticism, their wounded self-love, their healthy curiosity--what I imagine the writer's awareness of an audience is in the capital of a small country where culture is thought to mean as much as politics, where culture *is* politics: some little nation perpetually engaged in evaluating its purpose, contemplating its meaning, joking away its shame, and sensing itself imperilled, one way or another. (qtd. in Milbauer/Watson 3)

The Jewish story has boundaries far-ranging from its internal, literary, constraints. In the same way that the Torah summons its reader to "responsible response, to answerability in the most rigorous intellectual and ethical sense," the Jewish story is the locus of group integrity (Steiner 4). With the spotlight of the story on the Jewish subject, with the "radiance of the world brought to bear upon a few human figures," the Jewish writer has an obligation to justify the principles of his attention (Bellow 15). Finally, as the Jewish writer opens his tribe to mass appeal, he opens his community to vulnerability: "[Zuckerman's driver] held up in his right hand a tiny handgun with a snub black barrel. What is Art? thought Zuckerman" (Roth, *ZU* 280).

Certainly, the implications of the Jewish story are of basic concern to a people with a past of persecution. If, as Abba Ebban has quipped, Jews "are a people who can't take yes for an answer," such a pervasive siege mentality is justified by a long experience of suffering (Shapiro 46). History may be "a Jewish word" (Ozick, "Yavneh" 30), it may be, indeed, what "snow" is to "Eskimos" (Roth, *CL* 322), but the Jews'

historical sense is largely defined by a memory of defensive opposition against oppressors. Hayyim Hazaz writes:

> . . . we didn't make our own history, the *goyim* made it for us. Just as they used to put out our candles on the Sabbath, milk our cows, and light our ovens on Sabbath, so they made our history for us to suit themselves and we took it from them as it came. . . we didn't make it, we would have made it differently. . . (qtd. in Mendes-Flohr 381)

In some ways, the history of the Jews can be reduced to one continuous fight against the Gentile, to one long night of exile. Truly, where "a collective memory is based on a collective forgetting of everything but one considered theme," the Jews' are obsessively focused on a collective memory of affliction (Marcus 258). Jewish history is not a "measure of time," it does not "form a point fixed in the past, a point which year after year becomes increasingly past," but rather is "eternally present" (qtd. in Mendes-Flohr 372). However hysterical, Zuckerman is not so far off to cry (on a heath no less): "'*We* are the dead! These bones in boxes are the Jewish living! These are the people running the show!'" (Roth, *AL* 262)

In literary terms, the burden of the "Jewish dead" is most explicitly illustrated by the Jewish reader's unfailing pragmatism. Like Doc Zuckerman, Jewish readers insist that, for a minority group, fiction must be more than imaginative fancy. Jewish fiction has factual effects on a hostile Other. As Doc Zuckerman explains to his worldly son in *The Ghost Writer* (*GW*):

> 'It's not your fault that you don't know what gentiles think when they read

> something like this. But I can tell you. They don't think about how its a great work of art. They don't know about art. . . People don't read about art--They read about *people*. And they judge them as such.' (116)

Nathan's father, naive in his literary language perhaps, is wide awake to the consequences of Jewish art. He knows that, once out in the world, the Jewish text is "subject to a multitude of interpretations (and misinterpretations) and may very well be appropriated for purposes the author never intended" (Rubin-Dornsky 170). As we have seen, even in modern America, the Jew's fictional representation is prey to deep-seated fears about social security. Nathan rails that he and his family "are not the wretched of Belson!," but his mother's response--"But we *could* be--in their place we *would* be"--is difficult to refute (Roth, *GW* 133). Similarly, Wapter's challenge to Zuckerman, his pushy questions about whether "there is anything in [his] story that would not warm the heart of a Julius Streicher or a Joseph Goebbels," may be caricaturistic but they are also characteristic of a people for whom writing has important extra-literary functions. Ultimately, for the Jew, imagination is inextricably linked to actuality, the "leap of thought" is inseparable from a "leap of action" (Guttman, *Jewish Writing* 5). While the Greek "word", *logos*, means to "reckon" or "think," in Jewish tradition, *davhar*, the Hebrew for "word," translates into "act" and "be" (Bloom qtd. in Finkelstein 38). At its most basic level, Jewish writing must be a deed and a declaration: "To be what you write. To write what you are. These are the stakes" (Jabes 353).

At this juncture, the question arises: what *is* the "moral" Jewish story? How *should* one write in the knowledge of Jewish history? Undoubtedly, for many Jews, the

risks involved in telling Jewish tales are offset only by those stories which present an unflaggingly positive Jewish perspective. The "right sort" of Jewish story can actually work as a vindication of Jewish defeat (Wilson 47; Bellow 15). Taking the Russian-Jewish context as his example, Bellow suggests,

> Quite understandably, to the writer in the Russian Pale it seemed most important to present Jewish life as sympathetically as possible. Because the Jews were remorselessly oppressed, all the good qualities of Jewish life were heaped up in the foreground of their stories. Raw things--jealousies, ambitions, hatreds, were frequently withheld. . . (17)

Deprived of the "luxuries of revelation," Jews developed a "cultural style encouraging prudishness and self-censorship: there were things every one knew. . . yet only rarely was it deemed proper to speak or write about them" (Howe, *World* 96). It is Jewish propaganda, not Jewish realism, that seems to offer a palliative to Jewish suffering. In a Jewish story formed in the spirit of public relations, the conflicts of Jewish life might be held in charmed suspension (Kazin 591). Like the *Aggadah*, the creative element of the *Talmud* fostered in the "upheavals suffered by Israel during the [Second Temple] period," fiction could function as a redeeming document of Jewish virtue (Heinemann 42). In fact, if we look at the *Aggadic* story of Adam and the aleph, we find a telling parable about the way in which the Jewish text could bolster its community in times of stress. This story, taken from David Roskies, recounts Adam's confrontation with God upon the destruction of the second temple. Abraham asks God how He could destroy the Temple where he had offered his own son. God responds that Abraham and his children

have sinned "and transgressed against the whole of the Torah and the twenty-two letters in which it is composed." Abraham, "never one to dally, calls the Torah and the letters to testify." The aleph testifies that Israel has, indeed, sinned. Abraham challenges the aleph: "You, aleph, are the first of all the letters, and you come to testify against Israel in the day of their trouble! Remember the day when the Holy One. . . revealed himself upon Mount Sinai and opened with you, '*anokhi*, I am the Lord your God,' and no nation accepted you but my children, and you come to testify against my children!" The aleph "immediately stood aside and gave no testimony against them" (Roskies 33-34). Adam's use of the aleph shows how the "good" Jewish word might operate to save the Jews from damning judgements. The law of the Jewish letter is to protect Jews from all those who might damage their image and threaten their lives.

With a sense of such Jewish textual tradition, the response to Roth's work comes into focus. According to Roth's critics, his portrayals of Jewish sexuality and neurosis gave menacing "proof" to the anti-Semites. Without necessarily arguing with the authenticity of Roth's observations of American Jewry, his detractors were upset by the "brutal" candidness of his "reporting." Roth notes,

> Informing. There was the charge so many of the correspondents had made, even when they did not want to make it openly to me, or to themselves. I had informed on the Jews. I had told the Gentiles what apparently it would otherwise have been possible to keep secret from them: that the perils of human nature afflict members of our minority. ("Writing" 161)

To tell the uncensored story of Jewish characters was to endanger Jewish safety in a malevolent world. It was bad p.r. and even worse propaganda. Of course, this reaction to Jewish writing shows up in fictionalized form in Roth's Zuckerman series as well. Zuckerman, too, is accused of informing, even collaborating, with the "enemy." The rapacious appetite Nathan displays for revealing Jewish "misdemeanours" is the bane of his family's life. Seeing him as an apostate son, Nathan's father goes so far as to repudiate him in a melodramatic deathbed scene. As Henry confirms, Doc Z. does call his son a "Bastard" in his last moments:

> You *are* a bastard. A heartless conscienceless bastard. What does loyalty mean to you? What does self-denial mean, *restraint*--anything at all? To you, everything is disposable! Everything is *ex*posable! Jewish morality, Jewish endurance, Jewish wisdom, Jewish families--everything is grist for your fun machine! (Roth, *ZU* 274)

In yet another shade of Howe, Henry decries his brother's capacity for negative testimony. The grist for Nathan's fun machine is, according to his family, meat for the anti-Semite. Apparently, Roth and Zuckerman are not the only ones to be animated by the doubts of their detractors.

However, Roth is not alone in his challenge to the insular literary conventions of Jewish bowdlerization. Bellow may understand his community's defensiveness, but he also questions the response to suffering it has inscribed. He writes,

> Jewish literature and art have sentimentalized and sweetened the ghetto; their 'pleasing' pictures are far less interesting than the real things. . . The

> Jews are much slandered, much threatened, greatly sinned against--should they for these reasons be unfairly represented in literature, to their alleged advantage? (18)

Perhaps Jewish repression is not the answer to oppression. It might be that the Jewish method of dealing with victimization perpetuates rather than pacifies their insecurities. As Roth propounds:

> The solution is not to convince people to like Jews so as not to want to kill them; it is to let them know that they cannot kill them even if they despise them. . . It is necessary, too, to unlearn certain responses. All the tolerance of persecution that has seeped into the Jewish character--the adaptability, the patience, the resignation, the silence, the self-denial--must be squeezed out, until the only response there is to any restriction of liberties is 'No, I refuse.' ("Writing" 164)

As we shall see in a later examination of Jewish-American writing, there must be an alternative to a Jewish textual identity defined by its opposition to mainstream culture. There must be a way to articulate Jewish being without cowering under the burdens of Jewish history. Finally, other responses to the Jewish predicament must assert themselves as Jews move out of more entrenched habits of affliction.

Hello, Columbus: The Jewish Story in America

Where Roth's work is part of a larger continuum of Jewish textuality, so too, the Zuckerman series is created from a specifically American perspective. Zuckerman's struggles to situate himself as a Jewish-American author are profoundly informed by the ways his immigrant forefathers have dealt with their textual inheritance. Truly, the expectations of readers and writers in the Jewish community have been significantly altered by their experiences in the United States. The issues which Roth's autobiographical parody brings to the forefront, the Jews' sense of the story as a collective document and an extra-literary deed, for instance, all shift in America. In America, textual identity was complicated by American values and aesthetic ideals. Indeed, where immigrant fiction asserted the Jews' assimilation with mainstream culture, second generation Jewish art would come to reject Jewish imperatives altogether. While reading and writing are as old as Judaism itself, upon arrival in the New World Jewish textuality underwent a profound coming of age.

In the promised land of America, Jews entered into new covenants and needed new myths of origin. As Irving Howe confirms, the Jews who came to America were those who shook off their Jewishness in steerage, "If you would speak with disrespect, they were no more than a mob. If you would speak with respect, they were a vigorous people" (*World* 71). Hailing the United States their "Zion" and Washington their "Jerusalem," it was the story of Americanization which came to occupy the Jewish imagination (Guttman, "Conversion" 39/40). Like many other immigrant groups, Jewish writings of the early twentieth century can be understood "not only as expressions of

mediation between cultures but also as handbooks of socialization into the codes of American-ness" (Sollors, *Beyond* 7). If Jews were "Not Quite Our Class, Dear, as they used to say on the *Mayflower*," the Jewish text offered one means of charting the Jews' accomplishments at assimilation (Roth, *PC* 6). The popularity of "realistic" works such as *The Rise of David Levinsky*, for example, suggests that, this time, the melting pot was to include its Jewish ingredient (Fischer 233).[9]

Doubtless, the Jews' efforts to join the American mainstream were undertaken with certain caution. As Sam Girgus points out, with their background, "Jews could not readily become complacent members of the establishment, however much they might possess [or at least strive] for its visible signs" (*Covenant* 33). Nonetheless, the American landscape opened new horizons to the Jews. America was unique in its offer of Jewish independence. American ideals of "dignity and freedom," themselves taken from Old Testament sources, provided Jews with a rebirth of sorts (Girgus, *Covenant* 4). Jews' might be expected to divest themselves of "alien traits," but as long as they remained Americans on the outside, they could rise to the heights of success in their own fashion (Mayo 18).[10] In direct contrast to their Russian forefathers, the American-Jewish community "began its real history as a post Emancipation Jewry" (Girgus, *Covenant* 195). It was Emma Lazarus, after all, a renowned Jewish poetess, who wrote

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[9] Intriguingly advertised as autobiography in its first publication drafts, Cahan's novel was touted as one whose protagonist's "intense and complicated struggle shows, as no invention could do, the traits of mind and character by which the Jew has made his sensationally rapid progress in the business of America" (qtd. Sollors, *BE*, 169). Even in this rags-to-riches story, however, Cahan is critical of his character's abandonment of Jewish religion and culture for American ways.

[10] A widespread joke in pre-war America poked at Jewish attempts to "pass": "He used to be Jewish, but he's all right now" (Feingold 130).

the text inscribed on the Statue of Liberty (Kazin 587).

New possibilities for Jewish life in America naturally resulted in new literary conventions amongst Jewish writers. Like their *shtetl* counterparts, Jews in the ghettos of urban America treated writing as an advertisement for their cultural virtues. Yet, counter to the Russian-Jewish story, the Jewish-American text was a show of consent with majority cultural values and practices. In *My Life As a Man*, one of Roth's many immigrant fathers hits his mark when he scolds his young son for a sloppy signature:

> 'This is the way they teach you to sign your name, Natie? This is supposed to be the signature that somebody on the other end is supposed to read and have respect for?'. . . 'Ah, now *that's* a signature!'. . . as though the name were in fact appended to the Emancipation Proclamation. (5)

The Jewish immigrant text was a herald of the good health of American Jews. It was, indeed, a kind of Emancipation Proclamation; it marked the immersion, rather than the retreat, of Jews in American society. By 1944, one writer in the *Contemporary Jewish Record* explained that the presence of Jews "in the front ranks of American literature. . . is a clear evidence of the fact that American Jews have reached the stage of integration with the native environment. They are spectators no longer but full participants in the cultural life of the country" (qtd. in Daiches 30). Through a certain amount of social distancing, through a break from exclusively Jewish manners, the Jewish-American writer became a prime contender in the American race for happiness.

As might be expected, the immigrant narrative did not continue to hold sway over

the Jewish textual imagination. Changing times demanded changing forms of Jewish expression. In second generation Jewish literature, stories of Jewish-American confirmation gave way to stories of American-Jewish repudiation. Film magnate Harry Cohn once joked, "'Relief for the Jews? What we need is relief from the Jews'" (Feingold 85). Tales of suffering and success in America had worn thin for younger Jews. Rather than writing of immigrant triumphs in Americanization, the American-born Jew wrote in celebration of "universalization." Instead of aiming to be "less" than Jews, the sons of immigrants sought to be "more" than Jews, to be men of letters (Fiedler, "Go Home" 91). As Zuckerman hotly attests, Jewish intellectuals of Milton Appel/Irving Howe's generation hoped to escape East side ambitions by joining the aesthetic ghetto of the American literary academy:

> When they were alive they wanted to strangle the immigrant bastards to death because they dared to think they could actually be of consequence without having read Proust past *Swann's Way*. And the ghetto--what the ghetto saw of these guys was their heels: out, out, screaming for air, to write about great Jews like Ralph Waldo Emerson and William Dean Howells. (*AL* 99)

Through art, the Jewish intellectual cultivated refinement. Elevation and not emancipation entertained Jewish literary attention.

In place of the imperatives of Jewish textuality, second generation Jewish-American writers were bound to the constraints of art. For the Jewish intellectual, art was no longer treated as the product of Jewish experience; it was the source of life itself

(Trachtenberg 333). The literary way, as Zuckerman waxes, was "Purity. Serenity. Simplicity. Seclusion. All one's concentration . . . reserved for the gruelling, exalted, transcendent calling" (Roth, *GW* 11). Contrary to collective traditions, numerous Jewish writers embraced an ascetic, autonomous religion of art (Guttman, *Jewish Writing* 8). Now, suffering was to be in the service of imagination. Lonoff explains that "Ordinary human pleasures have nothing to do with it. Ordinary human pleasures be damned. The young man wants to be an artist" (*GW* 53). The artist of principle was not to be accountable to his/her parochial community. Alienation as Jews shifted towards an alienation from Jews (Shechner, *Revolution* 16). Estrangement was the hallmark of the Jewish intellectual. The importance of the "I" effaced all other commitments. In Lonoff's "seven volumes of stories," Nathan tells us he "could not think of a single hero who was not a bachelor, a widower, an orphan, a foundling, or a reluctant fiancee"(*GW* 91). Apparently, "serious *modern* authors," were guided by "a demanding and intricate *self*" (Shechner, *Revolution* 7). According to Allen Guttman "Judaism ha[d], in a sense, been Protestantized" (Guttman, *Jewish Writing* 8).

Yet, where Jewish-American sons in America strove to unshackle themselves from their Jewish textual bonds, Jewish traditions were not to be easily overcome. Though the Jewish-American artist, Roth included, has insisted that "a writer's first responsibility is to the integrity of his own kind of discourse," as we have seen, the Jewish text embodies a variety of competing discourses (qtd. in Milbauer/Watson 6). Robert Alter confirms:

> There are good and manifest reasons for writers with a deep Jewish

> consciousness to be suspicious about the saving power of art. The Jews have no tradition of aesthetics as an autonomous realm, no historically-rooted notions of the poet as hero and guide. Some Jewish writers seem vaguely uncomfortable with the very idea of artistic originality, even as they aspire to it, as though it were something they had filched from European Romanticism without ever being quite sure of the genuineness of the article. (Alter, *Defenses* 15)

Coming from a culture where "beauty was a quality, not a form, a content, not an arrangement," the Jewish aesthete was necessarily awkward (Howe, *World* 11). For Jews and other ethnic groups, the burden of literary inheritance could not simply be shrugged off. The minority writer's genealogy, their anxiety of influence, was a complex cultural--as well as psychological and artistic--matter.[11]

It is this struggle with artistic identity which inspires much of the comedy in the Zuckerman books. Despite, or due to, Roth's own experiments in artistic "autonomy," the laughter in the Zuckerman series is directed not only at the narrowness of the Jewish reader but at the pretences of the Jewish writer. While a shocking number of critics miss Roth's point, Zuckerman's artistic angst displays an "ironic posture towards art as well as toward social realities as a means of self-definition" (Trachtenberg 328). Roth's use of the *bildungsroman*, for instance, normally the story of a writer's *development*, actually

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[11] Answering to his position on black textual heritage, Ralph Ellison states:

> I inspected Wright's work and I knew him, but this is not to say he 'influenced' me as significantly as you assume. . . But perhaps you will understand when I say he did not influence me if I point out that while one can do nothing about choosing one's relatives, one can, as an artist, choose one's 'ancestors.' Wright was, in this sense, a 'relative,' Hemingway an 'ancestor.' . . (qtd. in Gates 121)

undermines Zuckerman's seriousness at the altar of art. Zuckerman's idolization of the artist, his worship of the divine "sanity" of the artistic life, is set up as a straw man ready for the fire. When Nathan muses, "I would have thought the madness of everything but art. The art was what was sane, no? or was I missing something," Roth invites us to fill in a derisive reply (*GW* 98). Roth, like the James of "The Middle Years," suggests that "the solace art affords" is questionable (Trachtenberg 338). Zuckerman's desperate manoeuvres to attain artistic grace mockingly underline "a lingering suspicion that the whole dramatic agony of modernity is not worth the candle, that there is something perhaps bogus and certainly futile in the effort to be authentically modern through a heroism of the imagination" (qtd. in Shechner, *Revolution* 44). What Roth, and finally Zuckerman, recognizes is that art and life are not neatly divisible. As Zuckerman admits:

> All he wanted at sixteen was to become a romantic genius like Thomas Wolfe and leave little New Jersey and all the shallow provincials therein for the deep emancipating world of Art. As it turned out, he had taken them all with him. (*ZU* 229)

"Culchah" and culture, Judaism and the literary endeavour, are inextricably linked. Contrary to the *bildungsroman*, which is a "record of personal experience leading to self-realization," the Jewish writer enters adulthood through a ceremony marking an "acceptance of cultural wisdom," through the reading of a communal cultural text (Trachtenberg 326). Subject to Jewish materials and a Jewish imaginative past, the Jewish text is not a vehicle of individual escape but a vessel of group identity.

Certainly, for the post-Holocaust writer, such a correspondence between Jewish textuality and Jewish identity has become exponentially more complicated. On the one hand, since the 1960's, the ethnic experience in America has had a charmed significance. Where the early twentieth-century demanded cultural invisibility, post-World War Two America has emphasized cultural specificity. As David Daiches recounts,

> [Americans] were discovering a 'usable past'. . . It became academically and critically acceptable to discover an organic relation to your past rather than to believe that the American destiny was to reject the past and build a future free of the errors and tyrannies of Old World history. . . (33)

The hyphenated identity in America changed from being a minus to a plus (Sollors, *Beyond* 91). Ethnicity was, and continues to be, in vogue. However, if the ethnic perspective has gained new prominence in American life and letters, such an interest in diversity is also a distressing signal. Irving Howe has suggested that, in fact, subculture "finds its voice and its passion at exactly the moment that it faces disintegration" (qtd. in Wirth-Nesher, *What* 19). American ethnic writing may be "condemned to oscillate between two meta-narratives: one of homogenization, the other of emergence; one of loss, the other of invention" (Clifford/Marcus 17). Ethnic art seems to gain popularity only as ethnicity itself becomes a cultural artefact. In a weird twist of the Jewish modernist project, art has become a source, not an expression, of *ethnicity*. The American writer's "inpatriation," his/her devotion to indigenous ethnic material, is really a hollow pledge of allegiance (Fiedler, "Zion" 83). Ethnic writing is less a return to culture, than a search for it.

To be sure, the Jew in the post-Holocaust era faces a startling predicament: where earlier generations either embraced or escaped cultural constraints, today's Jewish exile is from Judaism itself. America "may have won the war. . . but the Jews had lost a culture and a history, and while as Americans they shared 'our' victory, as Jews they were inconsolable in their defeat" (Shechner, *Revolution* 30). Essentially, "Jews everywhere have been maimed by the European catastrophe" (Kremer 15). Geography aside, all Jews are figuratively the survivors of the Nazi terror. The question of how Jews should behave in the aftermath of the Holocaust, of whether to remember or forget Jewish extermination in Europe, has become a central issue for Jewish identity (Furman 109). Truly, the Holocaust has called for a reformulation of Jewishness (Shechner, *Revolution* 30).[12] In fiction as well as daily life, the Holocaust remains a recurring chorus to the Jewish-American lyric; it exerts a constant moral force on the Jewish-American's self-conception and self-expression. Elie Wiesel writes:

> For the Jewish novelist of today, assuming he does not repudiate his Jewishness, there can be no theme more urgent and meaningful than that of the suffering of his people in the Nazi era. All plots and parables pale and sound trivial by comparison: his is the awesome privilege to identify with a tale unique in its shattering power. (qtd. in Kremer 4)

For the post-Holocaust Jewish writer, the text has become a necessary life-preserver. Jewish writing has taken on therapeutic dimensions as the text works to heal some of the

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[12] George Steiner writes: ". . . a mother's death is a son's rebirth, but a rebirth into adult aloneness, into the most definite of exiles from shared identity and remembrance. From this psychic and somatic exile there can be no return" (15/16). Like the death of a parent, the end of European Jewry has thrust the Jewish-American descendent into a lonely reawakening.

cultural wounds inflicted by the Nazis. In the wake of the Holocaust, Jews realized that a whole culture, not only the Jewish community, was expendable. Jewish writers were urged to write both as a memorial to the Jewish dead and as a spur to the Jewish living. It is no coincidence that, at the same time that Jews were rediscovering their past in the 1960's, so too, literature on the Holocaust began a substantial development (Kremer 15). Something, anything, had to be salvaged from the cultural wreckage of the Nazis.

Of course, European extermination was not the only threat to modern Jewish identity. On the homefront, American-Jews were the victims of a dangerous self-effacement. If rhetorically melodramatic, Henry Zuckerman's West Bank friend, Ronit, is correct when she claims that "assimilation and intermarriage. . . in America are bringing about a second Holocaust" (*CL* 103). The assimilationists' and aesthetes' efforts to transcend their Jewishness proved only too successful. By placing their energies in such "isms" as Americanism, modernism and capitalism, American-Jews had left their Judaism to wither away. Cultural markers had become all but empty symbols. Ethnic boundaries had become so blurred that Jews were now largely indistinguishable from other Americans. As Ted Solotoroff explains, Judaism in America was

> no longer a fate, as it had been so recently and completely in Europe, but rather was more like a fact, and not necessarily a central one, about oneself. Instead of the burdens of The Chosen People, there were now the exhilarations of a choosing one. ("Marginality" 61)

Living in the "security of anachronism," in the safety of a democratic country, the Jew

could actually decide his/her cultural stance (Finkielkraut).[13] Where even the most deracinated Jew of the *shtetl* was forced into a Jewish affiliation via persecution, the modern American-Jew was free to exile him/herself from Judaism as they wished. Without doubt, "the real test of Judaism" has become its new-found prosperity and acceptance (Neusner 33). Roth affirms,

> *Jews are people who are not what anti-Semites say they are*. That was once a statement out of which a man might begin to construct an identity for himself; now it does not work so well, for it is difficult to act counter to the ways people expect you to act when fewer and fewer people define you by such expectations. ("Writing" 165)

Finally, only a thin essence of Judaism remains (Howe, "Response" 70). Like Nathan, the American-Jew has become "the object itself, like a glass or an apple" (*CL* 324).

Although Jewish singularity has undergone severe erosion, Jewish-Americans have not been passive in their response to cultural erasure. Parallel to post-Holocaust reactions, Jewish-Americans have sought to counter the assimilationist threat through cultural activity. They understand that,

> If we [the Jews] blow into the narrow end of the shofar, we will be heard far. But if we choose to be Mankind rather than Jewish and blow into the wider part, we will not be heard at all; for us America will have been in vain. (Ozick, "Yavneh" 34)

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[13] For an enlightening look at the post-war Jewish crisis see Alain Finkielkraut's memoir, The Imaginary Jew. A co-editor with Roth and Milan Kundera on *Le Messager Europeen*, Finkielkraut offers an interesting contrast to the American-Jews' obsession and anxiety about post-Holocaust identity as he writes from the perspective of a French son of Holocaust survivors.

For many, assimilation has acted as "a challenge and a goad to renewed creativity" (Neusner 51). Missing a Jewish centre--a Jewish subject--Jewish writers have focused on filling absences and atoning for failed opportunities of Jewish affirmation.[14] They have turned to ghettos of the mind, to "a creative act of the will" in "an imaginative 'return' to tradition" (S. Rubin 195). As Robert Alter notes, Jewish writing has become an "experiment in the possibilities of historical continuity, when most of the grounds for continuity have been cut away" (qtd. in Malin 6). Challenging the "avant-garde of acculturation," the modern Jewish writer has taken a stand "against the secret shame of the assimilationists, against the distortions of the Jewish nostalgists, against the boring, bloodless faith of the prospering new suburbs" (Solotoroff, "Marginality" 60; Roth, *AL* 75). Contemporary Jewish writers, Roth as one example, have not simply left their waning culture to dissipate, but rather have reinvented themselves as arbiters of cultural vitality. Like Zuckerman, who flirts with becoming the doctor his father had always dreamed of, Jewish-American writers have converted "the Oedipal *conflict* into the Oedipal *project*" (Wallace 28). Indeed, in M. L. Hansen's phrase, 'what the son wishes to forget, the grandson wishes to remember" (qtd. in Wong 151). If the answers to the contemporary Jewish dilemma are not always cut and dry, at the very least, Roth and his generation of American writers are powerfully engaged with re-exploring Jewish questions.

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[14] In *The Anatomy Lesson* Nathan says of his dead parents: "'I miss them.' To miss. To feel the absence of. Also, to fail to do, as to miss an opportunity" (214).

Letting Go: Philip Roth and the Conviction of Doubt

Having traced some of the traditions of Jewish textuality highlighted by Roth's autobiographical parody, we are now ready to explore the ways Roth himself responds to the Jewish question. How, exactly, does Roth theorize Jewish identity and art? Undoubtedly, if the text has been a centre of Jewish consciousness, the increasing disappearance of Jewish culture has rendered the Jewish story a puzzling document. Without dismissing traditions of Judaism, how can an alienated Jewish writer re-create and revise the Jewish story to fit contemporary models? Are there alternative modes of Jewish thought which might provide Jews of Roth's generation with a means of formulating textual identification?

Doubtless, the project of reinventing Jewish identity is problematic: lacking a stable cultural base, the contemporary Jewish writer must work against a vacuum. Charting the customs of a tribe on the brink of extinction, the Jewish writer has the unusual perspective of being at once familiar and remote from his/her material. The challenge of the contemporary Jewish author is to feel his/her way into culture through the very "consciousness of being outside it" (Alter, "Jewish Dreams" 71). Indeed, standing at a crossroads of culture, the Jewish writer has become a kind of indigenous ethnographer.[15] As Clifford and Marcus explain,

> [Ethnography] makes the familiar strange, the exotic quotidian. . . [and]

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[15] In Zuckerman's self-authored eulogy, it states, "he would have made a good anthropologist, perhaps that's what he was. He let the experience of the tribe, the suffering, isolated, primitive, but warmhearted savages that he is studying, emerge in the description of their rituals and their artifacts and their conversations, and he manages, at the same time, to put his own 'civilization,' his own bias as a reporter--and his readers'--into relief against them" (*CL* 209).

> is actively situated *between* systems of meaning. It poses its questions at the boundaries of civilizations, cultures, classes, races, and genders. Ethnography decodes and recodes, telling the grounds of collective diversity, inclusion and exclusion. It describes processes of innovation and structuration, and is itself part of these processes. (2/3)

Like the ethnographer, the modern Jewish writer has the odd burden of gauging affiliation by estrangement, he/she "stand[s] outside but not shut out" from their culture of origin (*CL* 256). Today's Jewish text must take an inevitable "bad conscience" or doubt as its medium. Uncomfortable in either the world of the *goyim* or the world of their fathers, Jewish writers are forced to look to the "inexhaustible number of intriguing postures that the awkward may assume in public, and the strange means that the uneasy come upon to express themselves" (Roth, "Great American Novel" 83/4). In an era when cultural boundaries are endlessly permeable, the Jewish writer must forge ahead of the limitations of the Jewish textual map. Uncertainty must become the Jewish writer's conviction.

To a great extent, it is such a doctrine of doubt which informs Philip Roth's literary outlook. Like Henry James, Roth recognizes that

> Art lives upon discussion, upon experiment, upon curiosity, upon variety of attempt, upon the exchange of views and the comparison of standards, and there is a presumption that those times when no one has anything particular to say about it, and has no reason to give for practice or preference, though they may be times of honor, are not times of

> development--are times, possibly even, of a little dulness. (4)

For Roth, only a careful critique of his Jewish textual inheritance can foster its development; only a deconstruction of the modern Jewish state can build it back up. Acknowledging the tenuousness of his Jewish connections, Roth confirms his Judaism by testing it. He writes,

> I have never really tried, through my work or directly in my life, to sever all that binds me to the world I came out of. . . But this has come about only after subjecting these ties and connections to considerable scrutiny. ("Writing" 9)

In Roth's work, the defining obligation of the Jewish writer must be to provoke. Following his mentor Kafka, Roth seems to suggest that,

> If the book we are reading does not wake us, as with a fist hammering on our skull, why then do we read it? So that it shall make us happy? Good God, we would also be happy if we had not books, and such books as make us happy we could, if need be, write ourselves. But what we must have are those books which come upon us like ill fortune, and distress us deeply, like the death of one we love better than ourselves, like suicide. (Kafka qtd. in Steiner 14)

Roth's ambition is to push his readers to the far end of tolerance in order to jolt them into a re-evaluation of their judgements. Consistently challenging Jewish convention, Roth forces his readers--and himself--to rethink the ways in which cultural ties are forged and maintained. As Roth explains, "For me, one of the strongest motives for continuing

to write fiction is an increasing distrust of 'positions,' my own included" ("Breast" 71). Essentially, Roth has made "of ambivalence not only an art but a theory of art" (Shechner, "Travels" 219).

Interestingly enough, Roth's method of cultural affirmation through opposition draws not only from literary sources but from Judaism itself. Where certain Jewish traditions explain the ways in which Roth has been received, alternative Jewish beliefs and customs offer insight into Roth's response to his Jewish critics. To be sure, the tradition of Jewish doubt is at least as long-standing as that of Jewish cohesion. While the ten commandments come from God, the Jewish contract has always been up for discussion. Stephen Whitfield teases,

> The Jews are not the only people to claim to have talked to God, but are, I think, the only people to have talked *back* to God, to have attempted to bargain and negotiate. ("Laughter" 205)

A distinctive Jewish penchant for polemic underlies even the Jewish covenant as a chosen people. The Jew's faith is not demanded on speculation but is proved by interrogation. In Judaism, it is the process, the consistent analysis of Jewish texts and tenets, and not the product, which determines piety. The Jewish text is not, contrary to frequent misinterpretations, to be taken as gospel, but rather to be looked at for edifying questions. George Steiner notes,

> A kabbalistic and hassidic intimation has it that evil seeped into our world through the hairline crack of a single erroneous letter, that man's suffering, and that of the Jew especially, came of the false transcription

> of a single letter or word when God dictated the Torah to his elect scribe. This grim fantastication is utterly expressive of a scholar's code. It points to the definition of the Jew as one who always has a pencil or pen in hand when he reads, of one who will in the deathcamps (and this came to pass) correct a printing error, emend a doubtful text on his way to extinction. (18)

The constant dialogue of the Jew with his/her religion acts as another means of protecting the faith from obsolescence. Since neither *Torah* nor *Talmud* are cast in mental stone, imperfection and uncertainty can be the Jews' way of expressing belief and humanity. The "if clause," the counter-text to religious dogma, is a vital part of Judaism. Questions are left to stand as answers in Jewish tradition (Hartman xi). Finally, Judaism is open enough to "allow not only multiple, but even contradictory interpretations to stand together as equally valid" (Spolsky x/xi). The Jew is, as Roth writes, "a dispute, incarnate" (*Operation Shylock*, 335).

Thus, however paradoxically, it would seem that the modern Jew's doubt about ethnicity actually enacts a powerful link to Jewish continuity. The Jew "honour[s] the past *through* rupture because. . . their past has been a tradition *of* rupture" (Finkelstein 3). Though some suggest that "the very moment a tradition begins to question itself, to mount elaborate campaigns in behalf of retrenchment, [it] . . . is in the long arc of decline," in fact, challenging Judaism keeps it alive (Pinsker, *Jewish Fiction* 93). By forcing an on-going cultural exchange, doubt can be definitive. The Jewish question confirms the value of its Jewish mark. Those Jewish-American authors who persist in

doubting their ethnic authenticity "may be helping to create it anew" (Sollors, *Beyond* 257). Roth's zest for negativity, his embrace of ambivalence concerning the Jewish theme, is less a betrayal than a testament to a Jewish mode of working through ethnic identity. If, as Mark Shechner posits, a culture's "surest guarantee of staying power is the vitality and success of its rebels," Roth may well be one of the pillars of the Jewish-American community (*Revolution* 55). By inciting conflict, Roth keeps the channels of Jewish reflection open. Ultimately, it is the Jew who "flinches from. . . muffles or deflects the pure hunt for truth" that forsakes his/her responsibilities (Steiner 20).

Perhaps the most vivid mode of articulating Jewish doubt is through the comic voice. For those with a tradition of irregularity, humour is an exemplary expressive convention: the conjunction of disparate elements and attitudes in humour speak in profound ways for the Jewish experience. Certainly, since *shtetl* days, the Jew has been characterized by what Max Wienrich calls "internal bilingualism," by an aspect at once "reverential, austere, bound by duty, ritual, and awe" and by irony, playfulness and mischief (qtd. in Shechner, "Dear" 145). Living in a parochial environment "bred of poverty" and "with a universal consciousness bred of study and intellectual ambition," the Jew is a "ghetto cosmopolitan," a rare specimen that combines vulgarity and sensitivity, the transcendent and the worldly (Shechner, "Dear" 145/6). To some extent, the Jew carries two identities within him/herself, "contrasting internal frames of reference whose abutment and interplay give form and inspiration to Jewish imagining" (Shechner, "Dear" 144). The gist of the Jewish jest is conflict and uncertainty. At base, Jewish humour is the disjointed man's blues, an improvisation on reality which calls attention

to incongruities, inconsistencies and even injustices in day to day life. Jewish humour "makes us think even as it makes us laugh" (Halio 4).

If inconsistencies within the Jew are a spur to laughter, so too, the Jew's comic consciousness is founded on the recognition of his/her irrational persecution. Jewish humour can be understood as another response to Jewish suffering. It "illustrates the cruelty of the Jewish fate, the futility and unending effort to come to grips with cruelty. When the oppressed cannot revolt, he laughs" (Dresser 14). As Zuckerman notes,

> . . . beneath the ordeal of melancholia and the tremendous strain of just getting through, a joke is always lurking somewhere, a derisory portrait, a scathing crack, a joke which builds with subtle self-savaging to the uproarious punchline, 'And this is what suffering does!' (*PO* 76).

Jewish humour can be "disturbing and upsetting, its phrases dipped in tragedy" (Howe qtd. in Blachner 19). Yet, humour is also the Jew's best defense against affliction. By a sudden thrusting downward, Jewish humour relieves inflated suffering. Recalling a Yiddish proverb--"If you want to forget all your troubles, put on a shoe that's too tight"--Robert Alter explains that "*Weltschmerz* begins to seem preposterous when one is wincing over crushed bunions" (qtd. in Blachner 4/5). Through an undermining of suffering, the comedian moves towards "some sense of acceptance of the world as it is" (Mintz 165). Rather than responding to Jewish oppression by a withdrawal from the contradictions of everyday life, as Jewish propaganda does, Jewish humour celebrates the ambiguous ways of the world. Even in scriptural texts, parody works to mend breaches of God's covenant (Roskies 20). In fact, according to Hyman Slate, "laughter may be

offered as proof of the existence of God"; to Slate, existence "is too funny to be uncaused" (qtd. in Bellow 17). At the very least, comedy acts as a negative shadow to Jewish religious dogma (Shechner, "Dear" 155). Parallel to the affirmative result of Jewish doubt, satire grounds ideas of spiritual transcendence in homely particulars, making Judaism relevant through humorous deflation. Finally, "laughter and trembling" in Jewish humour are both strangely united and strangely uniting (Bellow 17).

Where Jewish humour has been an important means of dealing with Jewish suffering, it has also played a key element in American-Jewish culture. Though nurtured out of the frictions of emancipation and oppression in Eastern Europe, Jewish humour has found ample sustenance in America (Whitfield, "Laughter" 196). Leslie Fiedler quips that "as a matter of fact, the Jew enters American culture 'on the stage laughing'" ("Zion" 67). To be sure, the hyphened nation of the United States has provided a "cutting edge" to Jewish wit (Shechner, "Dear" 155). Working from a background of "internal bilingualism," the Jew has been a shrewd commentator on the discontinuities between American ideals and the American reality. Regardless of the immigrant Jew's respect for American ideology, Jewish humour allowed him/her a necessary release of the frustration of making it the American way. The popular nineteenth century Jewish caricature of the *shlemiel*, for instance, challenged the "prevailing Anglo-Saxon model of restraint in action, thought and speech" as he "declare[d] his humanity by loving and suffering in defiance of the forces of depersonalization and the ethic of enlightened stoicism" (Dresser 13). Here, Jewish doubts about the majority culture were brought into focus by a heightened contrast between the *shlemiel* and his milieu. The bumbling

humour of the *shlemiel* was a way of lauding rather than solemnizing the Jews' cultural clashes in America.

Today, of course, the Jew's humour must be directed more determinedly at the Jew him/herself. Hardly an American "alien" any longer, the contemporary Jewish comic expresses doubt about the Jews' *difference* from American culture. As Leslie Fiedler notes,

> If today, Jewish American writers seem engaged in writing not the high tragedy of Jewish persistence in the midst of persecution, but the comedy of Jewish dissolution in the midst of prosperity, this is because they tell the truth about a world which neither they nor their forerunners can consider themselves guiltless of desiring. ("Zion" 70)

It is the disjunction between the *Jewish* myth and reality in modern America that is illuminated by the distorting lens of the comic gaze. If not quite the mode of masochism which Freud suggests, Jewish humour is a method of radically confronting Jewish, instead of simply mainstream, cultural norms (Blachner 4). In contemporary America, humour must become a way, "in a relatively tolerant society, of keeping up the resistance level" to homogenization (Whitfield, "Laughter" 194). Modern Jewish humour must mend the tears in the Jewish covenant, not only with God, but amongst American-Jews themselves.

Finally, Jewish humour acts as an index to the Jewish cultural predicament. The Jewish joke "does not create humor; it formulates a humor that is already there" (Shechner, "Dear" 155). At heart, Jewish humour must be approached as

> a *via regia* into the collective unconscious of a group no less revealing than dreams are of the individual unconscious; for in the comic, where all is essentialized and drawn in bold strokes, the basic terms of a culture are most available for inspection. ("Dear" 142)

In order for an audience or reader to laugh along with a comic, there must be a recognition of a shared cultural backdrop. Irving Howe confirms that "to compose a satire is not at all to free oneself from the obligation of social accuracy; it is only to order that accuracy in a particular way" (Howe, "Roth Reconsidered" 233). Comedy does not necessarily have to imply a rejection of Jewish culture; it can be seen as a counter-turn, or sidelong glance, at those qualities which most distinguish Jews.

It is exactly such parodic articulation of cultural conventions which Roth's Zuckerman series voices. Through his parody of autobiography, Roth both outlines and contests certain Jewish cultural traits: in his pseudo-self-analysis, Roth works to critique the assumptions, the collective unconscious, of his Jewish readers. While many have read the Zuckerman books as thinly veiled "romans a clef," in fact, Roth's collection is a manipulation and imaginative transformation of Jewish identity (Hendley 99). Like Zuckerman, Roth "'prefer[s]. . . exhibitionism at several removes'" (*ZU* 122). Rather than being strictly autobiographical, Roth's work presents "fables of identity, variations upon a theme of the self" (Shechner, *Revolution* 225). As Roth explains, "this legend of the self. . . is a kind of idealized architect's drawing for what one may have constructed--or is yet to construct--out of the materials actuality makes available" ("After Eight" 106). Good comic that he is, Roth stretches fact into parodic dimensions in

order to better explore the potential boundaries of his subject. For Roth, the autobiographical fiction is a "playful hypothesis," "an imaginative form of inquiry" (Roth, *CL* 210). Essentially, Roth's use of autobiography and personified autobiography is a satiric vehicle for expressing doubts and suggesting alternatives to Jewish traditions of reading and writing about Jewish identity. Through the patterns of autobiography Roth questions the cohesion of the Jewish story; he challenges the factuality and the collectivity of both the historical and contemporary Jewish text.

In the first case, as we have seen, Roth's comic use of autobiography points to the Jewish tradition of ethical reading and writing. Where Jewish readers invest the Jewish story with moral meanings, where they read fiction from a factual, extra-literary standpoint, Roth's parody of autobiography attempts to blur the lines between fact and fiction, between the aesthetic and the ethical realms (Halio 95). As Roth presents events from his personal life in a fictional context, his use of *Portnoy's Complaint/Carnovsky*, to name just one instance, he forces us to ask how we reality-test a work of fiction; what the role of imagination is in our construction of "facts"; and how we forge a psychological identification to a text. Though many believe that fiction pulls us into a text while non-fiction pushes us into a detached spectatorship, Roth recognizes that for his Jewish readers, such distinctions are rarely valid (Stone 320). Roth's self-conscious exploitation of autobiography underlines the quandary of the ethnic writer, whose choice of subject matter automatically seems to link him to an extra-literary domain. Like the serious autobiographer, Roth's play on autobiography acknowledges that certain "convention[s] of communication" force the writer to eschew "aesthetic freedom": "In

anchoring present consciousness in shared cultural experiences of the past. . . and in the reader's co-operating consciousness, the autobiographer necessarily surrenders some of the potential harmony, unity, and autonomy of art." (Stone 4)

However, even as Roth's exercise of autobiographical elements accentuates the particularities of his Jewish readership, his parody of the autobiographical pact between reader and writer subverts the merit of such textual habits. As Roth's use of such charged extra-literary topics as the Holocaust will demonstrate, Roth does not accept any simple factuality in fictional contexts. For Roth, factuality itself is a fundamentally factitious concept and, as Augustus Kolich points out, "the very pretence of intimacy in the autobiographical novel is a method of positioning that teaches us, among other things, to reach beyond invented spaces into a reality that we know is *unreachable*" (164--my emphasis). The complex volley between fact and fiction in the Zuckerman series is, in the end, a way of exploring how imagination, both on the part of the reader and of the writer, contributes to our sense of "reality" as much as any factual ingredients.

In addition to disputing the factuality of the Jewish story, Roth's parody of autobiography challenges the collectivity of the Jewish text. As sections one and two suggest, Roth's employment of private material underscores the public nature of Jewish writing. Where Roth/Zuckerman consistently see personal detail as fictional fodder, their readers equally consistently refute this autonomy. However individualistic, the writer's life story is part of a public dialogue of Jewish lives. Just as autobiography exists simultaneously, "in the private intentions of the autobiographer" and "for its public interpretive uses, as part of a general and perpetual conversation about life possibilities,"

Roth's comic management of personal experience is a self-conscious nod to the larger discourse in which Jewish writing participates (Bruner 43). Basically, Roth recognizes that "one cannot reflect upon the self. . . without an accompanying reflection on the nature of the world in which one exists" (Bruner 43). For Roth, the autobiographical trope is a way of investigating the interplay "between the particular and the general" in Jewish writing (Stone 7).

Nonetheless, if Roth accepts the collectivity of the Jewish text to some extent, his satire on autobiography is once again a jab at his readers' textual assumptions. Roth opposes any static notions of collectivity in the Jewish story. Indeed, his presentation of different types of Jews--Israelis, Eastern Europeans and American dentists, to name a few--challenges the very notion of Jewish communal identity. As Zuckerman tries on varying cultural identities, Roth problematizes the totalization of the "Jewish" self.

Ultimately, Roth's comic reworking of autobiography protests the cohesiveness of the Jewish cultural text. As Zuckerman tells Roth in *The Facts*,

> With autobiography there's always another text, a countertext, if you will, to the one presented. It's probably the most manipulative of all literary forms. (172)

In contrast to the conclusive efforts of some Jewish readers and writers, Roth's autobiographical series is what Charles Taylor terms "radical reflection" (qtd. in Bruner 42). Roth's autobiographical parody is a means of slipping a banana peel under the heel of authoritative Jewish ideology. His autobiographical reflections expose the inauthenticity of the "representative" Jewish text as Roth realizes that cultures "do not

hold still for their portraits," and that "attempts to make them do so always involve simplification and exclusion" (Clifford/Marcus 10). Like Geertz, Roth is alert to the fact that "coherence cannot be the major test of validity for cultural description," that "there is nothing so coherent as a paranoid's delusion or a swindler's story" (Geertz 18). Instead of blindly accepting any single Jewish vision, Roth's writing displays a wide variety of Jewish outlooks. The doubts which animate Roth's parody allow differing versions of the Jewish story to stand side by side. The questioning of Jewishness, the parodic probing of the Jewish textual, as well as extra-literary, identity, provides Roth with a definitive mode of articulating his Jewish voice. For Roth, ethnicity is not only a usable past, but a fluid, moveable tradition.

The Countertext: Rethinking Jewish "Fact" and Fiction

Perhaps Roth's most startling confrontation with Jewish conventions of reading and writing comes in his manipulation of the Holocaust text. Where Roth's autobiographical parody points out the Jews' extra-literary customs, Roth's use of Holocaust material draws out the implications of the relationship between fact and fiction in the Jewish text. Though Jews have posited writing on the Holocaust as a source of modern Jewish identification and cohesion, Roth seeks to undermine the "historical" or factual authority of the Holocaust story. He questions the authenticity of Holocaust writing as a link to Jewish historical continuity. Roth asks what the modes and motives of Jewish "ghost writing" are: how do we respond to the moral imperative of the six million? how can a fictional text tie us to a factual event? how does the American-Jew find a way into the suffering of his/her European counterparts?

Certainly, while the Jewish cultural text has undergone immense changes in the post-Holocaust era, new paradigms of Jewishness have quickly arisen to replace lost models of cultural affirmation. Although the Holocaust proved beyond any doubts that a culture could be a (re)moveable past, American-Jewish identity has nonetheless been reformulated around the usable cultural centre of the Holocaust. As Nathan writes to Henry, "Another place famous for inventing (or reinventing) the Jew was Germany under Hitler" (*CL* 145). It is in the strict cohesion of the Holocaust narrative, in the "witnessing" of Jewish catastrophe, that the modern Jew defines his/her identity. Not only did the Holocaust alter Jewish-American relationships to the Old World or to a now-decimated Yiddish culture, but it was a vital stimulus for second and third-generation

Jews to reconceptualize the very nature of Judaism itself. Jacob Neusner explains that, "For ideologists of the Jewish community, the most certain answer to the question of the third generation [Jewish identity] must be, 'There is no real choice.' And 'The Holocaust' provides that answer: '*Hitler* knew you were Jewish'" (90). After Hitler, Judaism shifted from being a religious category to an ethnic grouping (Neusner 90). The horror of the Holocaust was, as Anne Frank recognizes in her *Diary*, that Jews were killed simply for *being Jews* (Wilson 51). "Hitler," she writes, "took away our nationality long ago" (*Critical Edition* 274):

> We can never become just Netherlanders, or just English, or representatives of any country for that matter, we will always remain Jews, but we want to, too. (*Diary* 221)

With the Holocaust, Jewish identity became skin-deep; no matter how assimilated, the post-Holocaust Jew was now a racial representative of Jewish ancestry. At the same time that Jewish culture in Europe had escaped the Jew, Jewish identity had become inescapable.[16]

Not surprisingly, such a threatening re-formulation of Judaism as an ethnicity has become a consuming concern for American-Jews like Roth's characters. If Doc Zuckerman's "two points of reference in all the vastness" remain indelibly the family and Hitler, such a framework of cultural identity is part of a broad Jewish movement (*ZU*

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[16] This paradox of cultural affiliation is amply expressed in *Portnoy's Complaint*. In a schizophrenic internal dialogue Portnoy notes:

> Sorry, but there's no escaping destiny *bubi*, a man's cartilage is his fate. *But I don't want to escape*! Well, that's nice too--because you can't. *Oh, but yes I can--if I should want to*! But you said you don't want to. *But if I did*. (254)

253). Whether safe in Newark or not, the pain of the Holocaust, its negative confirmation of Jewishness, has made suffering and survival the core of Jewish identity.[17] Even Zuckerman's happy housewife mother, for example, finally comes to the Holocaust as a means of personal description:

> . . . when [the doctor] asked her if she would write her name for him on a piece of paper, she . . . wrote the word, 'Holocaust,' perfectly spelled. This was in Miami Beach in 1970, inscribed by a woman whose writings otherwise consisted of recipes on index cards, several thousand thank-you notes, and a voluminous file of knitting instructions. Zuckerman was pretty sure that before that morning, she'd never even spoken the word aloud. (Roth, *AL*, 41)

For the American-Jew, the Holocaust must be the first and last word of Jewishness. Regardless of the present crises in the American-Jewish community, the American-Jews' awareness of the Holocaust ties them irreparably to a Jewish continuum. When asked about Zuckerman's determination to carry his mother's *bon mot* with him instead of throwing it away, Roth affirms, "Zuckerman isn't the only one who can't throw this word away and is carrying it with him all the time, whether he knows it or not. Without that word there would be no Nathan Zuckerman" (qtd. in Furman 120). The Holocaust has taken on the status of a "root experience," a defining cultural moment, for all modern Jews.

However, if the Holocaust is a definitive marker of Jewishness, it is also a part

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[17] In a slightly different context, Zuckerman claims: "When you're in pain all you think about is being back in pain. Back and back to the one obsession" (*AL* 23).

of the Jewish debate on cultural identity. For the contemporary Jew, the Holocaust is a loaded symbol; it carries with it both the burden of Jewish-American guilt at surviving the European catastrophe and the tensions of cultural endurance in America. It is such complexities of the Holocaust as cultural guide which the Zuckerman series addresses. Roth's use of Anne Frank, veritably "*the* Jewish writer of our century. . . the trump card that no contemporary Jewish-American novelist can possibly beat," is a means of exploring the implications and manipulations of the Holocaust as a textual and cultural signifier for Judaism (Pinskér, "Significant Dead" 230). Though Wapter urges Nathan to see Anne Frank as an unproblematic icon of suffering, Zuckerman's fantasies about Amy Bellette/Anne Frank problematize her (Wilson 49). Roth's revision of the Anne Frank story, his provocative re-thinking of the Holocaust in Zuckerman's controversial terms, is his way of raising the 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 invoke sympathy from a critical audience by offering up one of its most sacred subjects. (Wirth-Nesher, "Newark to Prague" 26)

For Roth, the "facts" of the Holocaust are not simple "proofs" of Jewishness or Jewish writing, but are subject to specific interpretive practises.

To be sure, where all Jews are theoretical survivors of the Holocaust, many stake competing claims in the cultural wreckage. There is a certain "shrewdness of Holocaust remembrance"; the Holocaust is often used to legitimize Jewish weaknesses and to stymie

Jewish rebellion (Furman 117). As Portnoy rails at his sister,

> *I suppose the Nazis are an excuse for everything that happens in this house!*
>
> Oh, I don't know, says my sister, maybe, maybe they are. . . (*PC* 88)

History is not simply a cultural bank to be drawn from, but in E. L. Doctorow's words, is "a battlefield. It's constantly being fought over because the past controls the present. History is the present. That's why every generation writes it anew" (qtd. in Girgus, "New Covenants" 258). By becoming a symbol of modern Judaism, the Holocaust moves from being a "fact" to being fuel for "fictional" or imaginative responses to present-day concerns. In contemporary Jewish life, the Holocaust no longer belongs to those who died, but to those who live on and impose their "readings" on the past. Finkielkraut writes that,

> The partisans of Jewish memory declare: the dead teach the living, warn them and open their eyes. The enemies of Jewish memory declare: these dead serve no purpose, weigh us down, enfeeble our vision, mystify what's at stake today. Both sides can conceive of the dead only in terms of their *usefulness*. (54)

Once on the Jewish agenda, the Holocaust ceases to be "objective" and becomes interpretive. Neither the rantings of a Jimmy Ben Joseph to "forget remembering" nor Wapter's injunctions against Nathan's writing are without ulterior motives (*CL* 165). As Zuckerman finally acknowledges of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, "Anne Frank as a curse

and a stigma! No, there nothing that can't be done to a book, no cause in which even the most innocent of all books cannot be enlisted, not only by *them*, but by you and me" (*PO* 759). The Holocaust text is not a direct translation of life into art or fact into fiction, but is an expression of a position on the events in Europe and their meaning.

Undoubtedly, the Holocaust has not been cast as a "representative" Jewish experience without blurring a certain specificity. In order for the Holocaust to hold general Jewish significance, it has had to undergo a metamorphosis into archetype. Truly, where the Holocaust has changed from an event to an Event, it has become a cautionary tale in which all Jews are good and all Nazis absolutely evil (Roskies 9; 252). As David Roskies explains, the process of Holocaust memorialization requires that

> All past divisions would ultimately cease to have meaning, for *all* of the people were now holy. Liberated from their physical reality, from the vast contradictions of their life and their death, the Jews of eastern Europe entered the realm of myth. (224)

Like earlier responses to catastrophe which tended towards silence and positive propaganda, the conventional Holocaust text is one which enshrines Jewish virtue while eclipsing the realities of life before--even during--the camps. To repair the damage of the Nazis, the Jews have presented the Holocaust in terms of reverential abstraction. Rather than deal with the "facts" of the Holocaust, incomprehensible to some degree, the Jewish community has focused on a received script of events.[18] Even as Jewish

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[18] Zuckerman quotes Anne Frank: ". . . she tried to find a way to believe that she was somewhere in Germany, that she was not yet sixteen, and that her family was dead. Those were the facts; now to grasp them" (*GW* 156).

readers insist on the extra-literary functioning of the Holocaust story, it is their imaginative recreation of events, their mythic accounts of the Jewish dead, which provide them with a textual tie to the lived past of the Holocaust survivor.

It is such a recognition of the imaginative role of the Jewish "ghost writer" which animates Roth's ventriloquization of Anne Frank. While Roth's incarnation of Anne Frank first claims that "her posthumously published diary" is of obviously greater import than any "insipid bestsellers from which real people learn. . . about fake people, who could not exist and would not matter if they did," the brilliance of Roth's living saint is that she shows how the very facts of her life are not in accordance with the Jewish propagandists who use her as a shield (*GW* 184). Voelker confirms,

> The fiction that Amy Bellette is Anne Frank carries a more deeply pondered message to the world's Doc Zuckermans, to those judicious critics who yet insist that art operates on no alternate planet, that stories are about people. Had Anne Frank survived, she would embarrass us all by falling in love, or buying furniture, or wanting to interview movie stars. . . (94)[19]

Roth understands that the Jewish identity of the post-Holocaust era is constructed less on a truthful foundation than on a superficial screen for the projection of Jewish desires. It is not "Jewish facts" which are recorded in the Holocaust story, but a unique supposition of how events have, or should have, occurred. Essentially, the Holocaust

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[19] Interestingly, Anne Frank herself seemed to recognize the potential for misreading and embarrassment in her factual *Diary*. A recent critical edition of *Het Achterhuis* shows that Anne's diary was actually revised into a second draft intended for publication.

text provides a set of stable myths about the Jewish community only at the cost of erasing a more complex, more realistic, memory of the Jewish dead. Thus, "memory can eradicate the past just as surely as forgetting it, if the picture it draws is always a pleasant one" (Finkielkraut xvi).

Ultimately, it would seem that the contemporary Jewish project to revive Judaism after the Holocaust is prey to a multitude of difficulties: the modern Jew does not "inherit" a Jewish tradition so much as he/she invents "a suitable historic past" (Hobsbawn 1). Without the European Jew to counter the "historic" record, American-Jews' definitions of the Holocaust are largely imaginative uses of past facts for political and cultural purposes. Tradition is less "the totality of that which the community possesses as its cultural patrimony and which it bequeaths to posterity" as it is a "specific selection from this patrimony" (qtd. in Finkelstein 54). Memory, as autobiography characteristically shows, is guided by a "theory," it is "partly made, partly found" (Bruner 45). Whether cultural or personal, identities originate in the imagination as much as in a literal heritage. Indeed, as Stephen Whitfield suggests

> Historical imagination could grip the Jew only when. . . the past could no longer be transmitted according to the internal dynamic of Jewish family and communal life, only when memory ceased to be a dependable vehicle through which a heritage of longing could be reaffirmed. (*Jewish Time* 30)

The modern Jews' desire for an authenticating tradition with which to buoy up flagging American-Jewish faith has become the motive for an elevated and symbolic grasp of the Holocaust. Continuity between contemporary Jewish life and a Jewish tradition have not

been simply documented in the Holocaust text, but created there. There is no legitimate Holocaust story apart from aesthetic constructions of the event. Finally, according to Fredric Jameson, "although history is '*not* a text," it is nevertheless 'inaccessible to us except in textual form. . . it can be approached only by way of prior (re)textualizations" (qtd. in Wilson 41). Since we cannot "re-experience" the Holocaust in literature, the Holocaust text lacks authenticity except as it confirms the past in written, implicitly altered, form.

It is Roth's sense of the facticity of the authoritative Holocaust story which underlies his use of Holocaust material. He recognizes that "the facts are never just coming at you but are incorporated by an imagination that is formed by your previous experience. Memories of the past are not memories of facts but memories of your imaginings of the past" (*TF*, 8). Roth acknowledges that each of us has a particular aim in Holocaust remembering. We may find something in the facts of the Holocaust which triggers our identification with the event, but, ultimately, our individual imaginations are responsible for the leap of faith which imbues the events of the past with present-day meaning. To Roth reality is merely "one level of discourse among many" (O'Donnell 379).[20] Like James, Roth insists that our "experience" is made up not only of factual

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[20] In *Deception* "Roth" and his mistress debate about how "facts" or "reality" work in concert with the imagination:

> '. . . because you're you doesn't mean I didn't make *you* up.'
>
> 'I also exist.'
>
> 'Also. You also exist and I also made you up. 'Also' is a good word to remember. You also don' t exist as only you.' (206)

The imagination and reality work on parallel, often intersecting, planes. The presence of realistic elements in a work of fiction or an act or remembrance does not preclude the proximity of the imagination. Truly, facts are consistently transformed by the imagination.

elements but is

> an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness and catching every air-borne particular in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind, and when the mind is imaginative. . . it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations. (James 11)

At heart, Roth asserts that any apprehension of the Holocaust must be undertaken in open awareness of the imagination's role in remembering and "revering" the Holocaust. Roth calls upon his characters to bear particular, rather than abstract, witness to the Holocaust. He demands that Zuckerman, for example, bridge the gap between American survival and European suffering with full consciousness of the ways in which his own experiences--his role as writer, cultural spokesman and apostate son--play into his affiliation with the Holocaust as cultural symbol. Though Roth recalls that his early drafts of the Anne Frank section of *The Ghost Writer* were bound to conventional Holocaust modes of remembrance, he soon takes on the challenge to re-conceptualize the Holocaust on his own terms. He notes:

> When I began [the Anne Frank section of *The Ghost Writer*]. . . I was somehow *revering* the material. . . I didn't know where I was going so I began by doing what you're supposed to do when writing the life of a saint. It was the tone appropriate to hagiography. Instead of Anne Frank gaining new meaning within the context of my story, I was trying to draw from the ready store of stock emotions that everybody is supposed to have

about her. (qtd. Lee 243)

Finally, in the same way that Roth has generally dealt with "his situations and his characters in the rare, right way--without piety or apology or vindictiveness," really seeing through the "Jewish types," he comes to see that his perspective on the Holocaust must be distinctively Rothian in its candour, imaginative license and loving profanity (Solotoroff, "Jewish Moralists" 15). As one reviewer banters, "A certain courage is required. Take *that*, Hadassah!" (Leonard 86)

Certainly, Roth's bravado in creating a personal testament to the Holocaust is undertaken with an acknowledgement of the American-Jew's specific position in the Jewish continuum: rather than showing simple reverence and connection to the Holocaust, Roth's parody of Zuckerman's Holocaust imaginings is a means of emphasizing the American-Jew's particularly voyeuristic outlook on Jewish suffering. Safe in the United States, the American-Jew cannot fully understand or appreciate the Holocaust. Though the Holocaust is a defining feature of contemporary American-Jewish identity, it is so partly because of its distance from the day-to-day reality of American-Jewish life. Clive Sinclair explains,

> Being a Jewish writer Roth shares the same bag of images [as other Jewish writers], the difference being that when Zuckerman sees jackboots as threatening, it is a symptom of paranoia rather than the world's murderous intent. Bathos, not tragedy, seems to be Zuckerman's lot, being part of a dislocated age. (176)

Zuckerman's connection to the Holocaust cannot be attained through any shared

experience of tragedy. Despite Wapter's attempts to "manipulate Nathan by equating his world with that of Anne Frank, by equating the American-Jewish experience after the Holocaust with that of Europe," Roth suggests that, for Zuckerman, "these two worlds are inherently different, separated by. . . the very occurrence of the Holocaust" (Wilson 47). Zuckerman is a product of his own hyphenated American culture. He is not a victim of the death camps but of Camp; he cannot define himself in easy alignment with the Holocaust but must confront the complexities and guilt of the *post*-Holocaust, American-Jew. Anne Frank does not come to Zuckerman only as a Jewish saint but as an Irish actress in cockatoo feathers. As Zuckerman realizes: "That Anne Frank should come to him in this guise. . . Yes, he thought, life has its own flippant ideas about how to handle serious fellows like Zuckerman. All you have to do is wait and it teaches you all there is to know about the art of mockery" (*ZU* 116/7).[21]

Of course, as our previous discussion of the American-Jewish response to the Holocaust suggests, Zuckerman's specificity of experience does not preclude his identification with the Holocaust. Nonetheless, Roth's mockery of Zuckerman does assert that Zuckerman's mode of affiliation with the Holocaust must be in terms Zuckerman himself provides. Where Jewish tradition calls on Jews to "reactualize" past Jewish experiences, to "identify with the fate of their ancestors so fully that the distinction between past and present has in effect been obliterated," Roth posits that such

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[21] Zuckerman states:

> I'd considered very deeply and felt vicariously the wounds Jews have had to endure, and, contrary to the charges by my detractors. . . my writing had hardly been born of recklessness or naivete of the Jewish history of pain; I had written my fiction in the consequence of it, and yet the fact remained. . . the experience of it had been negligible in my personal life. (*CL* 307)

a reactualization can occur only in a dialogue between past and present events (Whitfield, *Jewish Time* 29). For Roth, the contemporary Jew connects to the past--whether in Germany or Egypt or Sinai--not by ignoring his/her own experiences but by projecting a sort of *empathetic* imagination onto what has gone before. It is by imagining *oneself* in the survivor's position that the modern Jew is tied to history. As Erich Fromm writes,

> The sense of 'I,' or the sense of self means that I experience myself as the true centre of my world, as the true originator of my acts. This is what it means to be original. Not primarily to discover something new, but to experience in such a way that the experiences originate in me. (qtd. in Stone xi)

Instead of giving up autonomy for ethical reasons, Roth suggests that it is through an autonomous re-imagining of the Holocaust, through a consideration of the Holocaust from an individual standpoint, that the Holocaust text can take on moral weight for the American-Jew. Rather than positing the individual imagination as an escape from Jewish issues as his mocked literary fathers do, Roth asserts that, indeed, the Jewish writer's particularized art works to connect the him/her to a Jewish context. Roth calls on neither a transcendent imagination nor a devotion to factual details in his response to catastrophe. Instead, he insists that the Holocaust text must be crafted in the interplay between fact and fiction, individual and collective perspectives.

Thus, Zuckerman understands the significance of Anne Frank by viewing her not only as a virtuous child but as a struggling writer warring with her parents for an individual voice. In direct contrast to her conventional persona, Zuckerman imagines the

Anne Frank who wrote that, "Honestly, you needn't think it's easy to be the 'badly-brought-up' central figure of a hypercritical family in hiding" (*Diary* 67). Zuckerman's link to Anne Frank is through his own "reading" of her life. He can see Anne Frank only through the lens of his own conflicts with a "hypercritical" Jewish family and community. For Zuckerman, Anne Frank is a bulwark against guilt, against the restraint of his imagination for Jewish "protection." As he states,

> To be wed somehow to you, I thought, my unassailable advocate, my invulnerable ally, my shield against their charges of defection and betrayal and reckless, heinous informing! (*GW* 210).

Zuckerman expresses the burden of the Holocaust by manipulating the past to fit his own frame of reference. Although Zuckerman's fantasy of Amy Bellette may seem blasphemous, in fact, it is by his irreverent imaginings that Nathan is able to affirm his position as a post-Holocaust Jewish-American writer. Rather than putting their Holocaust peers on an unreachable pedestal, Roth and his protagonist humanize and ground Jewish suffering by breaking out of atrophied models of Jewish mourning. They empathize with the victims of the Holocaust from their own faulty, uncertain, and deeply vivid perspectives.

Finally, Roth's complex imagining of Anne Frank works to challenge traditional notions of Jewish historical identification and memorialization. Like his co-editor on *Le Messager European*, Alain Finkielkraut, Roth plays with historical details not as a "call to return to the cultural monuments of the past," but as a "way of calling the sanctity of constructions of the past into question, by confronting the monumental use of history as

ideological self-legitimation" (Suchoff viii). Roth's comic treatment of facts argues against a cohesive Jewish cultural text. Diverging from the conventional Holocaust story, which attempts to deny the imaginative effort involved in memorialization, Roth is aware that "only through the ambiguities of fiction," can the reality of the Holocaust "acquire a redeeming truth" (Trachtenberg 327). Regardless of some critics' notions that *Zuckerman Bound* is a testament to the imagination's "status as a kind of Grendl-like monster, detached, unassimilated, and unintegrated into the whole of consciousness," it is by his imaginative capacities that Zuckerman situates himself in a Jewish framework (Brent 198). Zuckerman accepts his role as the "ghost writer" of the Jewish dead only after asserting his own imaginative energy as a member of the Jewish living. Indeed, the ghostly erection which ends *The Counterlife* can be read as Roth's last comment on the importance of the generative powers of the Jewish imagination. Just as Zuckerman has envisaged himself as a writer with "autumn in his heart and spectacles on his nose. . . *and blood in his penis*," Nathan's erection from beyond the grave hints that it is in his own formulation of Jewish identity, of a Jewish past as well as a Jewish present, that he will carry on the covenant of his forefathers (*GW* 65).

The Essential Jew: Scrutinizing The Jewish Self

To be sure, where Roth counters notions of a comprehensive Jewish past, he is also in opposition to totalistic ideas of contemporary Jewish collectivity. Indeed, Roth's writing acknowledges that,

> every imagined authenticity presupposes, and is produced by, a present circumstance of felt inauthenticity. . . Wholeness by definition becomes a thing of the past. . . accessible only as a fiction grasped from a stance of incomplete involvement. . . 'the real step that has been taken is withdrawal from any full response to an existing society.' (Clifford 114)

As we have seen with the American-Jew, it is out of uncertainty about the Jewish present that Jewish "roots" are so vehemently asserted. However paradoxically, the Jews' insistence on an acceptable Jewish tradition can actually shut individual Jews out of the lived significance of contemporary Judaism. By placing meaning in an ever-receding past, Jewish identity has become increasingly difficult for the present-day Jew to grasp hold of. Maria complains to Nathan:

> 'I object to people clinging to an identity just for the sake of it. . . All this talk about 'identities'--your 'identity' is just where you decide to stop thinking, as far as I can see. (*CL* 301)

Although Jewish readers have confirmed the communal importance of the Jewish text, Roth asks whether there can be any holistic group to which all Jews form a part. Is there an "eternal and essential" Judaism or is Jewishness simply a construction (Sollors, *Invention* xiv)? What exactly is ethnic identity?

If our memories of Jewish history are subject to particular contexts, so too, our definitions of Jewish identity, our affiliation to the modern Jewish community, must be created according to distinctive motivations and manipulations. For Roth, ethnicity cannot be a given, but, as Zuckerman's position in American society consistently proves, is subject to a specific evolution in time (Yerushalmi 92). Despite Hitler's cruel conception, the Jews' identity is not a fate, but a choice. Truly, a core of Jewish group identity is "progressively more difficult. . . to discover" (Neusner 50). The Jewish community has been a culture of acculturation, influenced by a constant variety of host cultures. While the Jews have come to be known be their adopted characteristics, by the "folkways of *Mitteleuropa* or of the Russian *shtetl*," in fact, the essential foundation of Judaism is nearly impossible to pinpoint (Guttman, *Jewish Writing* 10). The master text to the collective Jewish story is one which is ever-shifting; there is no stable centre to give unity to the individual Jew's story (Brent 198). According to Roth, just as the Jewish historical text is prone to a thousand permutations, the Jewish storyteller is less a mouthpiece for his/her people than one Jewish voice amongst many: each Jewish articulation has its own tenor. It is this variety of Jewish possibilities which Roth's Zuckerman books highlight. As Roth presents a myriad of Jewish identities in the Zuckerman series, as he shifts from scenes of literary activism to more literal-minded action and back again, he challenges ideas of Jewish communal identity. Where the Zuckerman brothers try on different Jewish costumes and customs, they come to see that Jewishness is made by men, as well as making them.

One of Roth's most hilariously rendered modes of Jewish group affiliation is that

of Henry/Hanoch: in Roth's parody of Henry Zuckerman's conversion to Judaism in the West Bank, we find an examination of how Israeli notions of collectivity have influenced contemporary Jewish identification. Undoubtedly, Zionist ideas of a Jewish homeland have had a profound impact on world Jewry. Contrary to traditional conceptions of Judaism as "an unhoused at-homeness in the text," Zionists have posited "the territorial mystery of the native ground, of the promised strip of land" (Steiner qtd. in Fredericksen 39/40). Rather than being passively acted upon by history, Zionism has encouraged a *chosen fate*. It sees Judaism as a national foundation where Jewish roots, indeed Jewish soil itself, might be nurtured. As Elchanan Senior explains to Nathan,

> 'See that tree?,' he said. 'That's a Jewish tree. See that bird? That's a Jewish bird. See, up there? A Jewish cloud. There is no country for a Jew but here.' (*CL* 52)

In the Middle East, Zionists promised the practical extension of an essentialized Jewish identity. Desert life was to establish the Jewish return to a biblical community: Israel was to simultaneously provide a home for the devout and a stage for those who wished to push forward distinctively Jewish citizenship and government. In Israel, the personal life of the Jews, the individualism and the psychological obsessions of the assimilated Diaspora Jew, were to be replaced by ideological concerns. Henry's romance with activism on the West Bank is based, at least in part, on his desire for a meaning beyond the personal neurosis of extra-marital affairs and American materialism. It is in Judea that Henry realizes that, beyond Nathan's characteristically Diaspora "Freudian lock," there "is another world, a larger world, a world of ideology, of politics of history--a

world of things larger than the kitchen table" (*CL* 140). In the same way that Roth's own work since *My Life As A Man* has "been an exercise in getting beyond the platitudes" of psychoanalysis, Henry's Israeli adventure teaches him to put together a Jewish self through "history and culture," through a determinedly collective process (Shechner, "Travels" 227). However Roth satirizes Henry's fanaticism, he does suggest that Henry's sense of a self in context, of a relational identity, may not be any more ridiculous than Nathan's onanistic self-regard. Henry may not be the only one to look at "the old life of non-historical personal problems" as "embarrassingly, disgustingly, unspeakably puny" (*CL* 105).

Certainly, where the American-Jew has turned in upon him/herself to some degree, the appeal of Israeli identity has been that of action. Especially in the wake of the Holocaust, the "the powerlessness, the scattered, the impotent Jews of the Diaspora" have been "restored to potency by nationhood" (Baumgarten 211). Where Jewish textuality fostered habits of affliction, Zionism was to take control of the Jewish destiny. George Steiner expands,

> Reading, textual exegesis, are an exile from action, from the existential innocence of *praxis*, even where the text is aiming at practical and political consequence. . . the 'textuality' of the Jewish condition. . . has been seen by Zionism, as one of tragic impotence. The text was the instrument of exilic survival; that survival came within a breath of annihilation. To endure at all, the 'people of the Book' had, once again, to be a nation. (5)

At heart, the movement from yellow star to blue star was to be a way of overcoming Jewish victimization. Zionism was to repudiate all the self-searching--the endless textual consideration of what Judaism was and how it should be conducted--for a brawny military force. Shuki Elchanan affirms that, even the relatively safe American-Jew can be overwhelmed by the power of Israel.

> 'The American-Jews get a big kick from the guns. . . Reasonable people with a civilized repugnance for violence and blood, they come on tour from America, and they see the guns and they see the beards, and they take leave of their senses.' (*CL* 75)

Truly, as Zuckerman muses, "the construction of a counterlife that is one's own antimyth was at [Zionism's] very core" (*CL* 147). Instead of the Nazis' negative affirmation of Jewish essentialism, Zionism has offered a positive formulation of Jewish ethnicity and nationalism. Despite its obvious position in relation to Jewish suffering, Zionism has touted itself as a Jewish future without the burden of Jewish oppression. Like the Anne Frank of *The Ghost Writer*, who asserts that "if she was going to be thought exceptional, it would not be because of Auschwitz and Belson but because of what she had made of herself since," Zionism expresses a deep Jewish desire to leave behind the imperatives of the Holocaust for a clean slate and a clear direction (*GW* 164).

Yet, as Roth's comic presentation hints, if Israel is a Jewish theatre, the Jewish play Zionism has scripted is not without its problems. While Henry goes to Israel in search of certainty, while he seeks out a secure centre from which to affirm his Jewish identity, even the Zionist conception of Jewishness is found wanting. Zionism is not the

sketch of a unified Jewish community but the acting out of a multitude of Jewish collective possibilities. As Terence Hobsbawn notes,

> We should not be mislead by a curious, but understandable paradox: modern nations and all their impedimenta generally claim to be the opposite of novel, namely rooted in the remotest antiquity, and the opposite of constructed, namely human communities so 'natural' as to require no definition other than self assertion. (14)

Israel is no "natural" embodiment of Judaism. It does not speak to any "fundamental" Jewish identity. Instead, as even the pro-Israeli spokesman, Shuki Elchanan, admits "'Every Jewish dilemma there ever was is encapsulated in this country'" (*CL* 64). Although Zionism hoped to be a liberation from Jewish doubt, although it conceived a future of "spectacular *progress*," in fact, Israel is a strange "*throwback*," a ghetto in the desert which "once again offer[ed] the Jews a life apart" (Finkielkraut 149/50). Israel rejected the Diaspora abnormalities of passive textuality and bespecled anxiety only to establish a community consumed with Jewish questions. Nathan writes to Henry,

> Look at the place you want now to call a home: a whole *country* imagining itself, asking itself, 'What the hell is this business of being a Jew?' (Roth, *CL*, 145)

Notwithstanding the national homecoming of the Jews to Israel, Jewishness remains a debatable, endlessly changing entity. Ethnic identity, rooted in the land or not, cannot be a simply harvested crop.

Where Henry's Zionistic conception of Jewish identity does not hold up to Roth's

scrutiny. *The Prague Orgy* suggests an alternative site for the Jewish collective identity. Unlike his brother, Nathan goes to Prague in order to connect to the textual community of Judaism. Shechner notes that Prague

> is something of a heterodox aliyah, not as Israel or Mordechai Lippman might welcome it but as a man makes it in his own soul, its orthodox feature being the written word, the book, that presides over it, as *The Trial*, "The Metamorphosis," and "A Hunger Artist" are raised to the status of Midrash, if not Torah itself. Prague, for all its straitness and repressiveness has appeared to offer new possibilities for the self: involuted, ironic, neurotic, but also stoutly committed to Jewish identity. ("Travels" 228)

Zuckerman begins his search for Jewish identity by going to the heart of Jewish Diasporism. In Czechoslovakia, Nathan finds a locus of Jewish identity which accords with the very authenticity his forefathers have enshrined in their Yiddish stories and Jewish jokes. Nathan seeks salvation from the ambiguities of American-Jewishness not by going to the Jewish city of the future, but by returning to a real ghetto of the Jewish past. He affirms,

> I knew about Palestine and the hearty Jewish teenagers there reclaiming the desert and draining the swamps, but I also recalled from our vague family chronicle, shadowy cramped streets where the innkeepers and distillery workers who were our Old World forebears had dwelled apart, as strangers, from the notorious Poles. (*PO* 760)

Prague provides an example of the Jewish "state" Nathan has only read about in Jewish texts. Indeed, Prague is the source for an obscure Jewish text which Nathan hopes will rescue him as he rescues it. By bringing back the "ideal" Yiddish story of Sisovsky's father, written in the "Yiddish of Flaubert" no less, Nathan aims to absolve his earlier Jewish sins (*PO* 720). As Olga sardonically pokes,

> 'The marvellous Zuckerman brings from behind the Iron Curtain two hundred unpublished Yiddish stories written by a victim of a Nazi bullet. You will be a hero to Jews and to literature and to all the Free World.' (*PO* 770)

Zuckerman longs to link himself to a Jewish continuity of textuality. Where his role as a Jewish-American writer seems compromised by fame and fortune, by prosperity and an indivisibility from majority culture, Nathan goes to Prague for a Jewish literary life distinctive in its seriousness and importance (Finkelstein 128). In the Eastern bloc, Zuckerman seeks out a Jewish collectivity based on more pressing concerns than synagogue attendance, nose jobs and the irate humourlessness of Jewish readers.

However, just as Roth undercuts any notions of a "genuine" Jewish identity in Israel, Zuckerman's counterlife as a "serious person" in Prague is consistently undermined. Zuckerman cannot easily connect to a Jewish community of suffering. In contrast to his Eastern peers, Zuckerman does not sweep floors but glides across them in expensive American shoes. Nathan does not find a viable Jewish identity in Czechoslovakia. Though he searches for a Jewish text to take back with him as a shield and a guide to the proper Jewish literary life, Zuckerman cannot even read the Yiddish

stories he has been sent to collect. Nathan must acknowledge that he is "a Jew whose language is English" (*PO* 716). Thus, as Finkelstein posits, "a work like *The Prague Orgy* is obsessed with discontinuity; its very existence as verbal form depends upon the constant awareness of rupture and loss" (131). Zuckerman must accept that the Jewish story cannot be passed on like a borrowed book, but must be created from one's own context. The "Jewish self" is a complex compound. Just as group identity cannot be transcended for any purely aesthetic Jewish modernism, so too, the "I", the experience of the individual, is impossible to overcome:

> In this nation of narrators I'd only just begun hearing all their stories; I'd only just begun to sense myself shedding *my* story. . . No, one's story isn't a skin to be shed--it's inescapable. . . You go on pumping it out till you die, the. . . story that's at once your invention and the invention of you. (*PO* 782)

In Prague, Nathan learns to re-evaluate his stance as Jewish-American writer. It is after his visit that he recounts what has happened to him during his career in Jewish-American letters (Wilson 45).

Undoubtedly, Nathan's stay in Prague teaches him an important lesson in Jewish literary identity: like Isaac Bashevis Singer, Zuckerman must accept that "art needs to have an address" (qtd. in Ozick, "Mirrors" 53). Since there can be no totalization of the Jewish self, Zuckerman's struggles maintain that particularity must, once again, provide the link to Jewish continuity and community. In the same way that historical identity can be created only in dialogue with the present circumstances of the Jewish reader or writer,

collective identity is subject to the Jew's time and place. Zuckerman realizes that "it is impossible to be outside of history. . . there is no place where people are not 'making' history" (Wilson 50). Rather than rejecting his position as an American-Jew as somehow unauthentic, Nathan comes to valorize the "American-Jewish experience, placing it on a par, on a level of astonishment, with the establishment of the state of Israel" and the survival of the Eastern European Jew (Wilson 50). Especially in the aftermath of the Holocaust, when the United States have become the most important Jewish community in the world, Zuckerman must learn to value his contemporary ethnicity (Shapiro 2). Roth's writing acknowledges that the acculturated identity, the hyphenated community of American-Jewry, is at least as important as any "pure" Judaism elsewhere. Indeed, Gershon D. Cohen has written,

> A frank appraisal of the periods of great Jewish creativity will indicate that not only did a certain amount of assimilation and acculturation *not* impede Jewish continuity and creativity, but that. . . [it] was even a stimulus to original thinking and expression, and, consequently, a source of renewed vitality. (qtd. in Neusner 50)

Contrary to Henry, who rejects his status as an assimilated Jew for the ideological identity of the Zionist, Zuckerman is awakened to the meaning in his American upbringing. Nathan celebrates the mutually enriching stance of the Jew in America. He lauds his American-ness as an expression of his Jewish freedom to fit in or stick out as he wishes. As he imagines his ancestors exclaiming at the sight of their assimilated relatives,

> 'We aren't supposed to be Americans--and there are those millions and millions of American-Jews! You can't imagine my feelings when I saw how they looked!' (*CL* 142)

In a direct parallel to Roth, Nathan sees his American identity as indistinguishable from his Jewishness. He understands that the Jewish text is not confined to one "history" or identity over another, but is written out of heterogeneous perspectives (Wilson 50).

Assuredly, Nathan's appreciation of his Jewish specificity has profound literary implications: Zuckerman comes to value his experiences as the source for a Jewish text. Though he has felt inadequate to the high literary task of his persecuted Czech counterparts, Zuckerman comes to see that, even while Newark might not have sustained a Kafka, it will provide abundant material for Zuckerman's own imaginative efforts (Voelker 90). The trials of the assimilated Jew are, indeed, a valid subject. Roth explains that the project of the contemporary Jewish-American writer is

> To do justice to a spiritual predicament which is *not* blatantly shocking and monstrously horrible, which does not elicit universal compassion, or occur on the large historical stage, or on the grandest scale of twentieth-century suffering. . . (qtd. in Lee 244)

Without denying the moral pressures of Jewish affliction or the collective significance of the Jewish text, Roth suggests that only in the writer's singular Jewish predicament can s/he find an appropriate Jewish story. Nathan cries out against Appel's request for him to act as Jewish spokesman against Arab terrorism not simply because of their literary feud, but because he understands that each Jew is trapped in the particularity of

his/her experience. He tells one of his many mistresses:

> Look, I obviously don't want to see Jews destroyed. That wouldn't make too much sense. But I am not an authority on Israel. I'm an authority on Newark. Not even on Newark. On the Weequahic section of Newark. If the truth be known, not even on the whole of the Weequahic section. I don't even go below Bergen St. (*AL* 99/100)

As comic Stephen Wright has quipped, "it's a small world, but I wouldn't want to paint it"; the writer's individual environment, his/her small plot of land, is soil enough for a vast imaginative yield. Zuckerman may be a "Jewish figure," whether he wants to be or not, but his Jewishness is always mediated through his own affiliations and affections. Like all of us, Nathan's Jewish text must be written out of the accident of his birth. In Bellow's words: "We do not make up history and culture. We simply appear, not by our own choice. We make what we can of our condition with the means available. We must accept the mixture as we find it--the impurity of it, the tragedy of it, the hope of it" (19).

Ultimately, Roth insists that there is no essential Jew. Just as Henry's trip to the West Bank teaches him to take the responsibility of Judaism upon himself, Roth suggests that Jewish identity is not simply inherited but is carefully constructed out of the materials of our lives (Baumgarten 212). Zuckerman's challenge is less to find the true source of his ethnicity than to bring together the varying roles of Jewishness which the twentieth-century presents him: Zuckerman's Jewish story will be "explicitly American, Jewish and male" (Baumgarten 103). Of course, where there is no fixed Jewish centre, the Jewish writer is left with a distinctly imaginative order. Roth notes,

> The circumstance of being born a Jew in America was a very special one in that it announced not only the specialness of being born, but a kind of extra specialness, the specialness of having been a Jew or being a Jew. This, however, remained a mysterious thing: one did not know exactly what it was and so one had to invent being a Jew. (qtd. in Malin, *Contemporary Jewish Literature* 6)

In the same manner that modern Jewish invention must provide the link to a Jewish past, the Jewish present, the Jew's assertion of "group" identity, is founded on a leap of Jewish imagination. Although Roth stresses the importance of culture and history in our self-formation, he is also aware that the mediation between self and world, Id and Yid, is undertaken according to the rules of improvisation. Where Roth "[distorts, caricatures, parodies, tortures, subverts and exploits]" his biography as a means of articulating a hypothetical Self, where he plays with the facts of his personal life to create a fiction of a unified identity, the contemporary Jewish identity is similarly based on a play of Jewish possibilities (qtd. in Lee 222). The Jewish text may have collective importance, but the Jewish story is less comprehensive than it is a compilation of endlessly differing Jewish perspectives. Because there is no over-arching authenticity or authority to the "Jewish self" the Jewish story is never totalized, it is open to infinite corrections (O'Donnell 374). As Finkelstein explains,

> Not one immigration but hundreds shape the Jewish consciousness, and Jewish writers with their Aggadic sensibilities operate upon the raw material of their identities in ways which actively upset reified notions of

any single, 'genuine,' Jewish time and place. (136)

The contemporary Jewish voice is constantly being modified. The Jew--in America or Israel or Europe--is not only a self-made man, but a "perpetually self-making man" (Shechner, "Travels" 223).

Conclusion

In the end, Roth's autobiographical parody traces a "curve of social discourse" (Geertz 19). For Roth, the autobiographical trope is a means of exploring both the traditions and transformations in Jews' conceptions of ethnicity. While Zuckerman rails that he is "Chained to self-consciousness. Chained to retrospection. Chained to [his] dwarf drama till [he] die[s]." it in Zuckerman/Roth's interminable considerations of the Jewish self that a whole cultural drama is enacted (*AL* 145). As Hana Wirth-Nesher puts it:

> Roth's intensifying preoccupation with the self-reflexive theme of his work's reception and with his own identity as a Jewish writer is narcissism turned moralism. ("Newark to Prague" 31)

Roth's play on the autobiographical motif is his way of evaluating Jewishness and the Jewish story. In the Zuckerman series, autobiographical humour points to important issues, not only about the Jewish individual, but about the relationship between the self and the group, fact and fiction, morality and aesthetics in the Jewish cultural text. Roth's autobiographical parody is a conceptual corner in which conflicting ideas about the Jewish story, indeed, in which clashing notions of Roth's own writing, might be investigated and reconciled.

To begin with, Roth's autobiographical parody calls attention to the Jewish reader's cultural investment in the text. Where Roth's critics have attacked his "verisimilitude," where they have read his realistic portrayals of Jewish life as an anti-Semitic betrayal of Jewish "privacy," Roth's autobiographical manoeuvres force us to

consider the reason why Jews have read literary works in such literal terms, why they have seen artistic material as shared cultural property. As Roth manages factual details in a fictional forum, he outlines the collective and extra-literary imperatives of the Jewish story. Roth's critical parody of Jewish habits of reading and writing shows how, dating back to the genesis of Judaism itself, the Jews have sought cultural cohesion and protection in the text. Through a brief examination of the history of Jewish textuality, we find that Jewish protectiveness, the Jewish propensity towards propagandistic self-representation, has been shaped out of a response to Jewish persecution and exile. For Jews, the text is the locus of ethnic identity. The Jewish story must justify its existence in terms of Jewish communal conventions. It is an articulation, not only of individuality or aesthetic originality, but of an on-going covenant between the Jewish writer and his/her community, between the Jewish present and the moral burdens of the Jewish past.

Of course, Roth's work is placed not only in a Jewish context, but in a specifically American scene as well. The means by which American-Jews have mediated the conventions of the Jewish text are vitally important to the Zuckerman books. Indeed, Roth's autobiographical parody draws on three waves of Jewish textual transformations. In the first case, Roth acknowledges early immigrant notions of Jewish storytelling. Like Doc Zuckerman, who encourages Nathan to write of the family success at Americanization, the Jewish immigrant emphasized writing as a document of assimilation. In contrast to their Russian cousins, the first generation of Jewish-Americans sought to maximize their involvement in an emancipating, exceptionally tolerant, mainstream society. Without turning their backs entirely on Jewish roots,

Roth's immigrant predecessors focused on nurturing their progress in the American way.

Following Jewish efforts at assimilation came second generation ideals of universalization. For the American-Jews of Milton Appel/Irving Howe's generation, art was to be a way of transcending Judaism. The Jewish text was to be a means of producing and not merely representing experience. The autonomous artistic self, and not the collective was to inform the literary endeavour. It is such aesthetic aspirations which the young Zuckerman embraces. Zuckerman's pilgrimage to Lonoff's retreat is an effort to find sanction for the literary calling. Zuckerman hopes that Lonoff will foster an artistic self where his own father has insisted on Nathan's connection to the Jewish group. However, as Roth's ironic comments on Zuckerman's literary leanings show, Zuckerman's attempts to shrug off the Jewish textual inheritance are futile. For Roth, the relationship between the Jewish self and the Jewish text are as complex as they are inescapable. Life and art are intricately, always interestingly, inter-twined.

Doubtless, Roth's position as a third generation American-Jew awakens him to the strange union between life and art in the Jewish text. While Roth's literary ancestors either documented or effaced Jewish identity in the text, for Roth, the text must actually serve as an invention of Jewishness. Under the pressures of European decimation and American assimilation, the modern Jewish writer must seek alternative means of formulating and confirming Judaism. For Roth, Jewish collectivity and continuity cannot be taken for granted. There is no longer either a representative Jewish text or a comprehensive Jewish self. As Ted Solotoroff maintains:

> [many of Roth's characters express a Jewishness that] has become merely

> a vague feeling and requires both a direct challenge from the outside and an act of moral imagination to come alive and identify them and their basic values. (""Jewish Moralists" 17)

Only in the constructive criticism of the Jewish story, only in the imaginative re-thinking of Jewish history and the Jewish community, can the contemporary Jew assert his/her Jewish identity.

Certainly, it is in a strange counterturn to Jewish textual traditions that Roth and his peers come to determine their Judaism. Alienated from Jewish culture, modern Jewish writers are faced with new problems and projects in crafting the Jewish text. Like the ethnographer, contemporary Jewish authors must accept a "condition of off-centredness" in the world, they must come to terms with "a state of being in culture while looking at culture" (Clifford 93). As Roth himself learns, the third generation Jew must look to doubt, to an affirming questioning of Jewish culture, as an alternative method of Jewish affiliation and identification. Without a stable centre of culture to draw from, Jewish uncertainty must become the writer's conviction. Portnoy hits his mark when he cries to his analyst, "Is this truth I'm delivering up, or is it just plain *kvetching*? Or is *kvetching* for people like me a *form* of truth?" (*PC* 105). The self-conscious inspection of the Jewish predicament is the Jewish writer's only means for finding a link to Jewish continuity. In fact, it is in the comic voice of a Portnoy or a Zuckerman that the Jewish writer's identity in the text might be best articulated. Just as Jewish humour has often worked to heal the wounds of Jewish oppression, so too, the comic mode can fight against Jews' total erasure in the aftermath of American success and European

tragedy. The Jewish story remains a vindication of Jewish defeat. However, for Roth and his contemporaries, the Jewish text must no longer hide Jewish difference, but work to buoy up Jewish distinctiveness as s/he treads the waters of forgetfulness. The Jewish writer's comic doubt acts to keep Jews aware of their cultural prospects when all other cultural markers have been washed away.

It is exactly such comic doubt which animates Roth's autobiographical parody. In Roth's comic management of personal identity and fictional biography, we find a powerful mode for both challenging and revising the Jewish text. Roth's re-working of personal and personified autobiography not only outlines a Jewish heritage of textuality, but posits new conceptions about Jewish collectivity and Jewish "factuality." By extending the implications of the Jewish textual practices into parodic dimensions, Roth re-thinks out-dated and reductive notions of the Jewish cultural text.

One of the more controversial re-assessments of the Jewish text in Roth's autobiographical parody revolves around Jewish conventions of ethical reading and writing. Where Jewish readers have invested the Jewish story with moral significance, where they have read the Jewish text from a factual, extra-literary perspective, Roth's play on autobiography attempts to blur the distinctions between fact and fiction, the aesthetic and the ethical domains. Despite Roth's comments to Zuckerman, that, "[f]or me, as for most novelists, every genuine imaginative event begins down there with the facts," Roth's autobiographical parody subverts the status of facts in the Jewish text (*TF* 3). Roth refuses to accept simple factuality in fictional contexts. Instead, as his use of Holocaust material shows us, Roth posits that it is through our imaginations, through our

individual reckoning of historical and cultural events, that we forge identifications to the Jewish story. To Roth, even such sacred texts as the Holocaust script are subject to personal and creative motivations. Like Zuckerman's "Pop Self," Alvin Pepler, Roth realizes that there is, indeed, a difference between "an educated artist" and "a person who happens to be born with a photographic memory" (*ZU* 30). For Roth, it must be imaginative transformation and not only the recording of facts that draws us into a moral relationship with the Jewish story. Particularly in the case of the third-generation American Jew, for whom historical fact has a receding immediacy, Roth suggests that it is through the projection of our own frames of reference onto the facts, through the lens of our own imaginative concerns, that events like the Holocaust take on moral weight. As Roth finally explains, Jewish fiction "derives from the unique mode of scrutiny called imagination, and its wisdom is inseparable from the imagination itself" (qtd. in Milbauer/Watson 6).

Where Roth's autobiographical parody challenges the "factuality" of the Jewish text, so too, his employment of autobiographical humour undermines the collectivity of the Jewish story. Though Roth accepts the collective pressures of Jewish literature to some degree, he opposes any stagnant ideas of group identity. While autobiography itself can be "self-sealing," while the unified vision of a life can be "an instrument of cultural constraint," both Roth's manipulations of personal materials and his presentation of differing Zuckerman incarnations work to protest holistic conceptions of the Jewish textual identity (Bruner 39). As Roth displays varying possibilities of Jewish life around the world, as he follows the Zuckerman brothers in their quest for authentic ethnic

affiliation, he suggests that Jewish identity must be created out of one's particular environment. Indeed, since Jews in America can no longer draw on any one definition of Judaism, since the "essence" of Jewish life has become increasingly diffuse, Roth asserts that new voices of Jewish being must be articulated. Zuckerman's bathetic struggles for literary place in America must ultimately have as much ethnic "authority" as the gusto of the Israeli soldier or the noble persecution of the Eastern European Jew.

Finally, while many have understood Roth's work in "either/or" terms, as an opposition *against* his critics' narrow-minded Jewish conventions, in fact, as we have seen, Roth's autobiographical parody is engaged in a volley with Jewish traditions (Wirth-Nesher, "Artist" 271). Like the famous Talmudic saying, "Turn it and turn it again, for everything is in it," Roth displays an "and/or" mentality, a Jewish philosophy which rejects closure or holism for an endless questioning of Judaism (Finkelstein 46). Roth recognizes that it is Judaism's very lack of definition which is precious (Finkielkraut 169). Roth is interested not in the "*un*created conscious of his race," but in the inspiration of "a conscience that has been created and undone a hundred times in this century alone" (Roth, "Imagining" 246). In Roth's writing, change and imagination, the capacity to seize potentials and possibilities, form the *chupah* under which the Jewish past and present, the Jewish individual and the collective, are eventually wed. The text is still the core of Jewish identity, however, for Roth, this story must now be centred around the individual and his/her imagination.

Epilogue

Undoubtedly, Roth's struggles to formulate an ethnic identity speak to a wide American audience. In a nation of nations, the Jew can be seen as a "representative" American, as an idiomatic expression of the American way (Dresser 7). Like Roth, most Americans experience their American-ness *through* their immigrant experiences, "rather than in spite of them" (Roth, *TF* 136). Truly, in a mixed society like the United States, the interplay between the inside and the outside, majority consent and ethnic descent are of primary importance (Mayo 13). As Delmore Schwartz has jibed, "Europe is the greatest thing in North America" (qtd. in Malin "Breakthrough" 668). Although the distinctiveness of American identity "derives from the fact that it is supposedly self-made, self-determined, contractual and independent," the presence of the hyphenated American presents a basic source of conflict (Sollors qtd. Boelhower, "Autobiography" 131). The *construction* of identity is a self-conscious concern for the American. The United States remains a country in which "the fact of nationality" is "a problem to be thought about and discussed" (Podhoretz 662). What it means to be an American is in constant flux: every ethnicity re-invents both itself and its host culture as it enters the American stage.

From this perspective, it would seem that the ethnic story is a key form of expression in a pluralist society (Fischer 195). The issues raised in ethnic fiction--of "roots," communal identity and the cohesion of cultural texts--are of vital interest to a variety of American readers. Indeed, where the ethnic writer raises and thwarts expectations, where s/he plays with the "presumably stable relationship" between and

within ethnic groups, the ethnic text undermines a whole nation's pretensions to cultural authenticity or authority (Sollors, *Beyond* 252). If Roth's concern is exclusively with the Jewish theme, with the characteristic ways in which Jews have squabbled over ethnic definitions, nonetheless, his work has a deep national resonance. Roth's writing can be read as a metaphor for how all groups in America--from the Puritans to the most recent arrivals--must work through the burdens of identity. As Geertz finally claims: "Understanding a people's culture exposes their normalness without reducing their particularity" (14). Paradoxically, it is the unique qualities of the Jewish literary skirmish in America that give the Jewish subject universal appeal.

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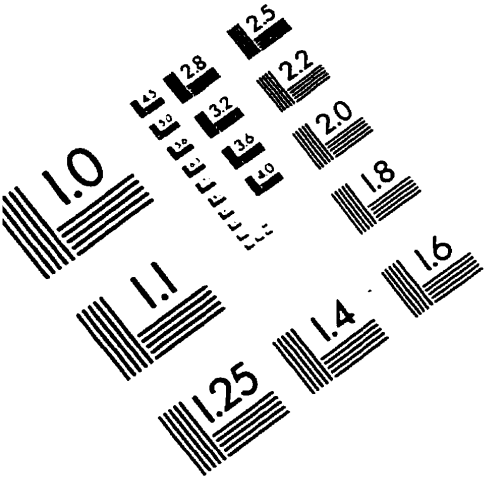

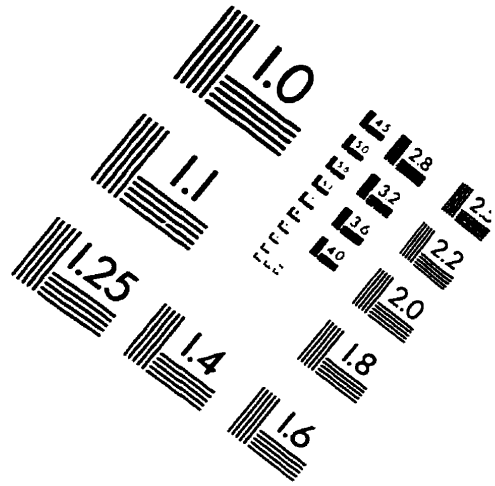

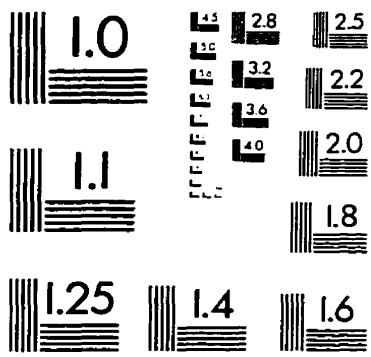

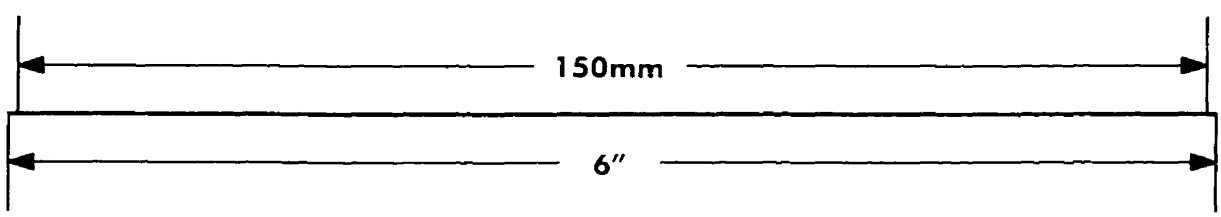

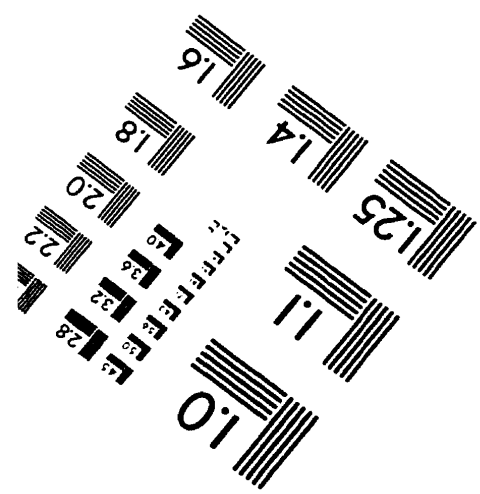

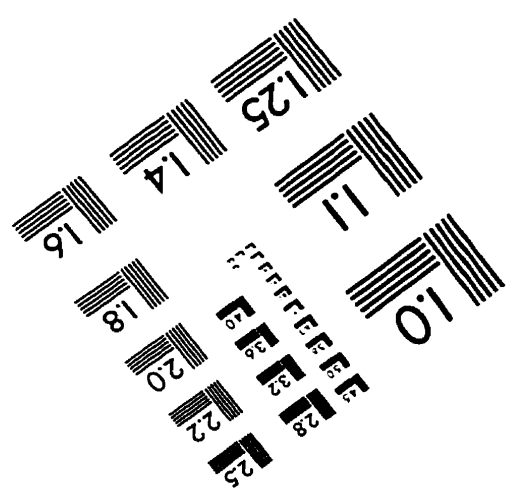

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