Chapter 1

The Ironic and the Irate

Since 1959 Philip Roth has been publishing steadily, an average of a book every twenty-three months—all but three having something to say directly about Jews. The cheers and the groans continue. While Roth has insisted he does not speak for American Jews or expound Judaism, he has given America a gallery of semitic stereotypes. Sophie and Alexander Portnoy,[1] Brenda Patimkin, Eli the Fanatic, and Nathan Zuckerman are household names. Zuckerman, himself a novelist taken by critics to be Roth's alter ego of the late seventies and eighties—to be the successor to Gabe Wallach, Alexander Portnoy, David Kepesh, and Peter Tarnopol—spent several novels protesting that he stood for nothing more than the power of art to illuminate life. From *The Ghost Writer* (1979)[2] to *The Counterlife* (1987)[3] Zuckerman kept declaring that *his* Jews were not *the* Jews and that his protagonists were not himself. He accused misreaders of willful self-impoverishment, of reducing fiction to some petty biographic detective game. Only fiction, this fictitious character insisted, has the power to convey the many-sidedness of fact.

Misunderstood Zuckerman, making those pronouncements to get the world off his back but with few illusions about getting himself off his back, was succeeded in the early nineties by a character bearing his author's name. Layered within Roth's fiction are authors and authors of authors, blurring the

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line between fiction and fact, all of them looking vainly for some boundary between their individual selves and their Jewish past—as if a statue could free itself from its stone and still have being. Some of Roth's latest fictions have invited readers playfully into the trap, that of identifying the "Philip" of *Deception* (1990)[4] and of *Operation Shylock* (1993)[5] with what they think they know of Philip Roth, the Jewish writer and biographer of his Jewish father. The confusions Roth once decried became his medium for sleight-of-hand demonstrations that the fiction writer is the teller of highest truth and that Jewishness is the perfect condition for exploring the American promise of freedom.

Roth's works have always irritated some readers; lately, the irritation has been intentional. Like Nietzsche, who wrote to be misunderstood, Roth has chosen to goad readers into thought, accepting some hostile reaction as part of the contract. Indeed, since the 1959 publication of his first book, *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories*,[6] Roth has been made increasingly aware that in trusting fiction to carry one's deepest thoughts and feelings, a writer, especially an ironic writer, takes risks. He mainly risks being identified with ideas or modes of expression he may only be using to dramatize more elusive concerns. For Roth the result has been more than the usual share of accusers and accusations. He has been accused of self-hatred yet of egotism, of anti-Semitism yet of Jewish parochialism, of a thinness of invention yet of flights of outlandish fancy, of being autobiographical and vengeful yet of borrowing personae from James or Kafka in lieu of a personal subject. Even some who have enjoyed Roth's novels have become accusers, feeling somehow they have been misled into profane laughter. And lurking behind all these has been the accusation of his trying to duck accusation by perverse strategies of anticipation or by intentional thwartings of public perception. When Roth labeled *Operation Shylock* a "Confession" from his real life, critics who charged him with having made the whole story up included some who had long declared him unable to invent anything he had not lived. So in *Sabbath's Theater* (1995),[7] he has tossed back at them a puppeteer instead of a novelist, as if he had not been ventriloquizing his characters all along.

Philip Roth has not generally taken to the air waves, used television interviews, or written prefaces to other people's books to explain to the public that perhaps they were not reading him right.[8] In the range of public exposure between what he has called "Mailerism," the direct taking on of the public as a figure whose life vies with his work, and "Salingerism," the hermitic retreat that ultimately refuses even to publish, he has taken a position midway, not courting the public outside the fiction—though becoming a public persona from within the fiction—yet sometimes answering criticism he has taken to be wrong-spirited. But early on he ruled out mass media exchanges or interviews about his work except in the literature sections of newspapers, usually at time of publication.[9] In

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seminars and forums of a purely literary nature he did attempt to clarify his art, but without reference to his personal life. The irony of this is that critics increasingly flushed him out. Having participated in the strictly literary exchanges, they brought to their popular reviewing aspects of Roth's personal life that he might once have preferred to keep private, and they made his efforts to remain above the fray increasingly part of the fray. Over the length of his career, Roth's most common response to this irony has been to make fiction out of it. As one critic has noted, however, "the ironical thing about irony is that those closest to you usually take it literally."[10] Writing about his having been misperceived didn't go far, in the late seventies and early eighties, toward pacifying a hostile public, but it may have paved the way for Roth's finest writing shortly thereafter. All he had to do was listen to one of his own novelist-characters, Peter Tarnopol: "Literature got me into this and literature is gonna have to get me out."

In the late eighties literature, it seems, got Roth out. Having weathered a stormy relationship with many of his readers—especially his Jewish readers—by hewing to his own line and holding out for judgment on his own terms, Roth with *The Counterlife* (1987) won the hearts and minds of some of his stoniest judges. In *The Counterlife* a mature Zuckerman, past rebelling at parents or protesting tribal censure, is suspended in a state of fictive uncertainty about his own identity: about how much he is the American, how much the Jew, how much the fiction writer, how much the Newark child trying to hold on to or repair to the myths of his own earliest security. And in continually refocusing Zuckerman's identity, Roth makes the reader refocus his own. *The Counterlife* thins the membrane through which experience and imagination nourish one another, letting certitude wait upon possibility. Repeatedly, just when the reader has identified himself with the travails of one character, Roth dissolves that character as the mere imaginings of another and forces the reader into yet another perspective on himself. By continually reopening the reader to new possibilities, *The Counterlife* had a liberating effect. To Roth, the praise and the acclaim in awards and prizes must have been gratifying.

But, as if to prove that what literature could get him out of, quasi-literature could get him back into, Roth, essaying forth with *The Facts* (1988),[11] plunged again into the thicket. He chose to lead his readers over so dubious a landscape of his own life and career, as almost to invite the old hostility. The works that have followed, especially *Patrimony* (1991),[12] which attracted Jewish audiences for what Roth might once have considered the wrong reasons, have somewhat compounded the conflict. And in *Operation Shylock*, pure invention and biographic and historic fact mingle like brush strokes of a single painting. The surreal result is an emerging Roth perspective that defies readers to separate out personal, tribal, national, global, and fictitious shadings of an irritating character very much their surrogate.

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Why have readers so long and intently followed Roth's maps of misreading, pitching and lunging over broken terrain of critical and Freudian clichés? What in Roth fascinates even skeptical readers, even as some of them denounce him for reiterating mewling complaints or perpetrating tribal treachery? What do they find in his eternal revolving without resolving his characters' troubles? Perhaps the late Anatole Broyard had part of the answer. Suffering from terminal cancer and needing to unload his library to move into smaller quarters, Broyard considered what to do with each author's works. About Roth he mused,

> I felt that I had nursed him—or he had nursed me—through the long illness of our literature. He was my cynical big brother and my crazy little brother, too. When he made a mistake—and he made a few—it was I who blushed. Like so many American readers, I felt that I had got gloriously drunk with Philip Roth, we had gone skinny-dipping together, and had suffered with the same kind of women. I knew too much about him—and he knew too much about me—for me to give up his books.[13]

"Like so many *American* readers." Broyard, who was not Jewish, found in Roth not just some initiator into mystic rites, but a brother, fully and equally involved and at risk in the age. Not a sage outsider or a chorus, but a fellow player in the American tragicomedy. Without having to offer answers "during the long illness of our literature," Roth, it seems, could be trusted to air the questions of sensitive young men who might once have counted upon literature for answers. And that dual sensibility of cynical older brother and crazy younger brother could be trusted not to mislead. Declaim as his characters might against the unfairness of the world, in fiction Roth had mostly navigated by irony to skirt extremes of sentimentality, cynicism and despair. His material had provided a perspective on the changing American landscape. And if Roth's combatants had Jewish accents, their conflicts had been recognizable enough in Peoria.

Broyard's words echo a statement made some three years earlier by Primo Levi. Parting from Roth in 1986 after some four days together for a *New York Times* interview that Roth was to publish, Levi had said, "I don't know which of us is the younger brother and which is the older brother" (*Pat.* 211). Levi was apparently commenting on the mature Roth's understanding of fiction, particularly Holocaust fiction, and on their novelists' bond of intense introspection. Perhaps he saw pale reflections of his own survivor's guilt in Roth's young heroes' wailing at sacrificing parents, or perhaps Levi saw a mark of the "older brother" in these young heroes' ability to accept such ancient sacrifices and go on. In the years since Levi's death, Roth has increasingly

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assumed the voice of an aging generation, successors to the postimmigrants who dominated Jewish-American life in the middle of the twentieth century, forced to respond to the Holocaust.

Many of Roth's Jewish contemporaries had sensed in his early works a kinship closer than Broyard's American brotherhood. Ruth Wisse called Roth's

> the first literary voice that seemed to speak for our bunch, our group, our set, the particular gang of adolescents with whom I shared a mutual affection and an idea of what we stood against . . . a sensibility so familiar that it seemed to have come from our own midst, and in a sparkle of language . . . attractive to us. . . . Our affection for Philip Roth was part of the tenderness we felt for ourselves.[14]

Part of what they "stood against" was parental overprotection, being reined in by a now-comfortable generation seeking to keep them from dangers it had opened to them. Ironically, these young third-generation Jews sometimes seemed humiliated not by their own acts, but by their inbred ideals. Roth's characters are often caught redfaced between the generations. In book after book, young men struggle to enter American society on their own terms, trying to shake off, yet deeply appreciating, the limiting advantages of their ancient culture.

From the very start of Roth's career, questions about his literature have been intermingled with questions about himself: about his devotion to the Jews, about his feelings for family, about his attitude toward women, even about his personal life as a son, a brother, a husband or lover, and a nonparent—questions probed anew by Roth, himself, in the nonfictional *The Facts* and *Patrimony*. One hears about the "*Goodbye, Columbus* wars,"[15] about the uproar in the Jewish community over *Portnoy's Complaint*[16] and the continued attacks on Roth's subsequent publications by organized Jewry in its periodicals, its rabbinic sermons, its endless newsletters and discussion groups. But how extensive and how unalloyed was that hostility? In *The Facts* Roth tells of a traumatic encounter, of a near mob scene at (of all places) Yeshiva University, from which he had to be extricated by—irony of ironies!—Ralph Ellison; Roth offers that experience as just one example of the hostility of organized Jewry to his two great early successes. Were there other examples? Of what nature and to what extent? And, then, why Roth? Malamud married a Gentile, wrote Christological redemption pieces in Yiddish accents, and was loved by Jewish readers. Bellow married frequently—mostly younger and younger women, including Gentiles—presented assimilated Jews in ponderous intellectual style, and was and still is beloved as a true Jewish encyclopedist. As one critic put it in the mid-seventies, "Roth envies Bellow the old grace or magic or urbanity

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that turns away the anger of rabbis; while he, the author of *Portnoy's Complaint*, is denounced in every state of the union."[17] Indeed, Roth's writing about Jews has seldom been perceived as an act of love. And the guardians of Jewish perception were harsh in the postwar decades with any but clichéd loving of their people. Why Roth's immersion in the lives of Jews was seen as less loving than Bellow's is at least subject for speculation, but very respectable critics could take the questionings of his characters for a gauntlet to his people. Was it just some irritant in Roth, or did forces in the age itself contribute to this sensitivity? One might also ask why Roth's purposes were perceived so differently from those of these more accepted Jewish writers, how much more or less alienated or acculturated his characters were taken to be, or even how well and at what stages Roth knew his own purposes. Much of his journey out into the mediating world of fiction would be a quest to find the fountain light of his own seeing, a quest that would bring him back home.

To speak of a writer's purposes is necessarily to consider his view of man and of the role fiction can play in transforming his reader. Malamud's losers, *schlemiels* and *schlimazls*, are redeemed through their very loss. They sacrifice worldly recognition but find something new in themselves, often compassion for fellow suffering humans. The Jewish reader could easily join the gentile reader in feeling cleansed through that redemption. To read Malamud is to give up the world and to feel better for having given it up. But Roth's characters seldom accept their fate. Nor are his strivers like Bellow's strivers, who may succeed, even as they think they have failed, by finding "the consummation of [their] heart's ultimate need."[18] Roth's characters do not rest in loss of the world or feel redeemed at having wrested from that loss some single personal fulfillment. More than any other response to their own experience is the loss itself: seeing some illusion shattered without having it replaced by anything comforting. They do not even gain the emotional comfort of an overwhelming sadness, which might teach them that they can feel, and, in feeling, perhaps plumb the depth of their own humanity.

This seeming hardness in Roth has often been taken for personal failure, or selfishness. Where the reader, certainly the traditional Jewish reader, might expect a tender patting of the protagonist, Roth provides irony. And to many—in the early years especially among Roth's elders—that irony has seemed oversubtle or misapplied, allowing first-person narrators, in defending against the outrageous, to gloss the vicious. As a result, many readers, both Jewish and gentile, have felt left out of Broyard's asserted brotherhood. They wonder whether Roth has really been ahead of, or just insensitive to, his times. Has he shocked a sometimes grudging readership into recognizing their limitations and real possibilities or has he merely irritated people seeking solace in the human condition? In their questionings, of course, they have raised the ironic

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ante. As Wisse has suggested, if Roth has gotten his greatest mileage out of being a "critic of bourgeois complacency, what sweeter response than his constituency's cry of 'foul,' exposing that very obsession with propriety that he has been ridiculing?"[19] Part of Roth's "hardness" comes from leaving the questions festering in the fiction.

To try to answer any of these questions about Roth is to raise others, almost in serial logic, about modern life: questions about allegiance, maturity, freedom, family, the future of democracy, of Judaism, of Israel, the changing history of American Jewry in the postwar decades, indeed, the very questions about pluralism and multiculturalism that have recently challenged America. For whatever Roth's relationship to Jewish life might have been or might continue to be, he is an author very much bound by his times: cut off initially from European Jewish culture (though later rescuing lost works from that culture into English and assimilating the Holocaust), knowing far less about principles and practices—not to mention the scholarly tradition—of Judaism than about family-transmitted Jewishness, yet touched by values and assumptions of that tradition, and in childhood sufficiently content as both an American and a Jew not to seem disturbed by possible conflicts in these loyalties. Of this kind of Jewishness one may say of Roth what headmaster Rabbi Tzuref says to Eli (the fanatic) Peck about the Rabbi's ubiquitous gabardined assistant: "The suit the gentleman wears is all he's got." And as for Roth's qualifications to write about American Jews, he could answer with Eli: "I am them, they are me."

For Roth's generation of American-born Jews, it was normal to identify with the wider American culture, even as they sensed some incongruity between its popular images and the sounds and tastes of their own lives. Roth had come of age when normalcy was the last blooming of radio drama, was Gene Kelly and Frank Sinatra in sailor suits, was the postwar playing days of DiMaggio, Williams, and Musial (though for Roth, the stronger identification would have been with Duke Snider of the more proletarian Dodgers). Like the base line in a cardiogram, that view of normalcy became for a whole generation a measure for judging change. What would follow would be impure wars, greed, unheroic politicians, enterprises of no pitch or moment—the rewards of decency denied. Not that such failing was new in the world: it was just new to someone born to a lower middle-class family in 1933, for whose very people above all others the war had been fought, who could venture through American opportunity where his forebears had not—into old-line colleges and the American mainstream. Most of Roth's fiction has dealt with life in that imperfect postwar world, the life made for themselves by individuals with expectations and by institutions with power.[20] To be born into such innocence, into such expectations, was to be saddled with myths, with misconceptions that at once bolstered the egos of the youths of the age and threatened to unfit them for liv-

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ing in the real world. For young Jews the picture was further complicated by ties to family, parents who sacrificed for their advancement, and the sense of the forbidden—in foods, mates, pleasures. Such are the agitations of soul with which Roth has peopled his fiction.

Roth's late adolescence and early manhood were marked by rapid changes: from a secular Jewish childhood, secure in feelings for his family and friends, to beginnings in writing at a predominantly gentile college (producing formulaic stories without Jews or Jewish content), to a graduate school apostleship to literature that seemed to replace for a time the culture from which he had come (his rabbis now called Henry James, Gustave Flaubert, Anton Chekhov, and eventually Franz Kafka), to a brief stint in the army and back to doctoral studies punctuated and then terminated by publishing short fiction and some film reviews for *The New Republic*, to marriage and the dazzling success of the stories and novella—this time filled with Jews—which became the volume *Goodbye, Columbus*. He was, at twenty-six, a name.

In 1959 Roth was also a relative innocent in an age fast losing its innocence. Aware of some of the traps of normalcy, he had not yet learned the price of disclosing to a readership wearied with strife that normalcy was itself a trap. In 1959 America was already a dozen years into the cold war, had come through the McCarthy era and the Eisenhower years, trying to live its postwar dream of family togetherness, Doris Day, and the status quo. That there was rot in the society that had won the war and saved Europe for democracy was just hinted at in the quiz-show and Sherman Adams scandals. The police action in Korea was an unavoidable disturbance that the country had seemed to handle well. Rock music, drugs, Vietnam, the mid-sixties were still far enough ahead not to trouble dreams. Good-guyism marked the American self-image and invited everyone to work hard, raise families, get on the economic escalator, and be nice. Certain minorities, if they could blend into the split-level technicolor picture, were invited to the party. Even World War II itself, for those who had not fought or who had survived unscathed, was settling into romantic myth. Roth was just beginning to explore the frustration that comes from trying to live by myths. He did not yet fully realize that much of his work would be an attempt to demythologize the world so he could fathom its real offerings.

What Philip Roth was not in 1959 was a child of the thirties. The fact might be important to distinguish him from many of the critics he would encounter for a couple of decades. He had not come of age during the depression. He was not a joiner of movements, an active Marxist, or a social reformer. He had spent the first Roosevelt administration in the crib, the second in kindergarten and the elementary grades. While Arthur Miller, Alfred Kazin, Irving Howe, Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud were arguing over the purges, the Hitler-Stalin pact, Rapp-Coudert, or Britain's white paper, children of Roth's

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age were tying on towel capes to play Superman or having cookies and milk with Jack Armstrong or Uncle Don. The onset of World War II meant collecting paper, rolling balls of lead foil from cigarettes, saving bubble gum picture cards not only of baseball players but also of generals and admirals, learning the opening bars of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony as the Morse code for V for Victory; it meant the adventures of buying Aircraft Spotters Guides and, for Roth, spotting imaginary submarines off the New Jersey beaches. In the comic books Superman was joined by Captain Marvel, Captain America, Slam Bradley, and three servicemen named Red, White, and Blue, who went to war along with Lucky Strike green. Roth's world of family, school, and baseball left little room for moral earnestness—or alienation. Looking back at the period in 1959, Roth could say that he had

> lived in comfort and ease; [his] father might have been struggling to pay bills, [his] mother juggling so as to make ends meet, but it was all hidden from their two children, masked by the spotless house, the starchily fresh linens, and the full, well-cooked meals.[21]

And when Roth's older brother was drafted into the service after the end of the war, Philip was the little man of the house, available to comfort mother in father's working absence and to absorb some of the psychological static energy that could crackle across generational insulation. The war had been over for a year before the little man was ready for bar mitzvah.

Another difference from some of his Jewish critics-to-be marked children of Roth's time and upbringing. His family had a socialist but not an active Zionist leaning. He was not sent to youth groups or summer camps where modern Hebrew would have been taught or spoken. He learned prayer-book Hebrew, sufficient for bar mitzvah and congregational reading, but not the language itself. He was fifteen, the age of strain on family ties and of looking elsewhere for identification, when Israel's nationhood was proclaimed. Whatever pride or hope for the State Roth might have known, it was not self-identifying or intertwined with personal dreams. Israel and Europe would eventually loom as commentary on his generation's personal and family tensions, but it is those tensions that have mostly moved American Jewish life and that have set the foreground of Roth's books.

Even now, Roth probes myths of Jewish history by suggesting that not Israel but America may be the true Zion. American Jews may be more at ease in their land than Israelis in theirs. Again the irony is double edged. Because Jews look more like old-line WASPs than do America's newest ethnics, they are being accepted into that mainstream more quickly and are in a position to render it less exclusionary. The distance American society and culture have traveled since

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Roth's childhood can be sensed in the changing assumptions of Roth's books.

From all indications Roth was thoroughly comfortable among Jews during his family years. And by Jews he would have meant Ashkenazic Jews. Of some exotic Syrians encountered at the beach in summer he could say at the end of the fifties, "They were supposed to be Jews, but I never believed it. I still don't."[22] Jews looked and thought like his family and close friends. In a 1962 article Roth speculated that "Most of those jokes beginning, 'Two Jews were walking down the street' lose a little of their punch if one of the Jews, or both, is disguised as an Englishman or a Republican."[23] The punchline equation should not be lost. Jews were liberal, proletarian, demonstrative. They would love F.D.R. for the New Deal and his unrestrained, broad-smiling devotion to the laboring classes. Republicans were simply not to be trusted. Teddy Roosevelt had described the Episcopal church as "the Republican Party assembled for prayer." To Roth, as to his father, Republicans would remain just as out of touch with the masses in the personae of Dwight David Eisenhower, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, George Bush, or J. Danforth Quayle, all of whom Roth would characterize in the popular press as slightly unreal. And genteel Gentiles, though they had left marks of their heritage on the public buildings of Roth's native Newark, were as remote to Roth as the Jews of Roth's day would be to the present black inhabitants of his old neighborhood.

Roth's Newark was, according to another of its natives, Leslie Fiedler,[24] already well declined into second-rate status even for a small city in the shadow of New York, and would soon lose its Jews to the postwar exodus to the suburbs. But for Roth it was an enclave of peace and comfort (his Weequahic High School was over 90 percent Jewish), having by some urban standards the advantages of a suburb: trees in abundance, a sandlot ball field at the school close by, two-family houses separated by tree-lined driveways. For a kid given to baseball, hanging out at candy stores or in the backs of cars, and needing to go downtown primarily to use the library, the neighborhood had a parochial security of its own. Culturally, it was located halfway between the middle America of *American Graffiti* and the ghetto of Chaim Potok's *The Chosen*: Jewish, baseball playing, but completely unlearned in Talmud or any but those rudiments of prayer that might be taught after school at the local synagogue. At a sufficient distance from the rougher neighborhoods of Newark, Weequahic was a refuge from all discomforts except the summer heat.

The young Philip Roth spent his summers at Bradley Beach, sharing summer houses, refrigerators, and the sense of an extended family with other Jewish households, where the accents, including those of immigrant generation grandparents, were stereotypically Jewish. In his memoir of that period, published just as Roth himself was first becoming a subject for critical attention,[25] he idealized his father as the selfless breadwinner who provided wife and child

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with relief from the summer heat, and he defined the challenge of childhood as swimming beyond the last rope that separates beach from ocean, of going beyond the boundaries of parental control. By his teens that control included curfews, relations with girls, possibly some expectations at holiday time. There was also, apparently, Roth's growing sense of being as strong willed as his father and of their heading for an inevitable clash. By the end of high school, as he indicates in *The Facts*, he wanted very much to break away, partly at least so as not to exacerbate these normal tensions into outright conflict.

Conflict, of course, is the province of the fiction writer, and the conflict over defining and becoming a man may yield considerable fiction, even without being resolved. How being a man affects tribal allegiance is a question that will divide a readership like Roth's. In Roth's fiction, characters often struggle to understand freedom. Especially in his early works, the striver after manhood often asserts himself against cultural bindings seen as shackles. The "ethnic" facing the majority world by trying to shake off signs of his provincialism or by becoming the exotic—most easily on the sexual battlefield—is almost a cliché. It would seem, however, that Roth at eighteen, like many of his characters into their fifties, saw manhood as requiring a letting go, a testing in some outer world unknown to his own people.

In choosing Bucknell University, after commuting for a year to Newark's own Rutgers campus, Roth was doing more than taking advantage of an upturn in family fortunes that allowed him to attend college "away." Nor was he merely following the only known path out, blazed by another neighborhood kid, as suggested in *The Facts*. Any Jewish boy who chooses, even in his second year, a small Protestant school

> where the bylaws stipulated that more than half the Board of Trustees had to be members of the Baptist Church, where chapel attendance was required of lowerclassmen, and where the one extracurricular organization for which most Bucknellians seemed to have membership cards was the Christian Association (*Facts* 61)

is making a positive decision. And what Bucknell seemed to offer to a boy who as a high school senior had served on the prom committee was a forties movie of college life, with fraternities, freshman hazing, and the small town with its soda shops nearby, a picture that had filtered into Weequahic on the movie screens and over the radio. At Rutgers, he asserts in *The Facts*, he had moved beyond Weequahic in the mix of other Newark ethnics and

> hadn't any doubts that . . . Jews were already American or that the Weequahic section was anything other than a quintessentially American

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> urban neighborhood, but as a child of the war and of the brotherhood mythology embodied in songs like Frank Sinatra's "The House I Live In" and Tony Martin's "Tenement Symphony," . . . [he] . . . was exhilarated to feel in contact with the country's much-proclaimed, self-defining heterogeneity. (*Facts* 37)

If he "hadn't any doubts" in his conscious mind, still his critics would wonder from what recesses he dredged up all those doubts in the minds of characters from Ozzie Freedman to Alexander Portnoy to Nathan Zuckerman. His buying into America may have carried with it a sizable emotional debt. Beneath the tranquil surface there may have been palpitations that only the fictive voice could relieve. If that is so, and "so" is neither knowable nor finally relevant to enjoyment of Roth's works, then it is a testimony to the power of fiction that it can employ feelings the memoirist may dismiss. Or so, at least, says Zuckerman, Roth's alter ego and pen pal of *The Facts* (164–65), commenting on Roth's Bucknell experience almost forty years later.

Roth's family had considered itself liberal—theoretically socialist—and cosmopolitan, yet they were most comfortable with people like themselves. Philip's father had just moved up in a gentile company, Metropolitan Life—from Roth's point of view Jewish merit breaking through gentlemen's agreements and improbability. To Roth there was some adventure in the prospect of going completely beyond their boundaries, in trying himself out in the land of forbidden pleasures, of *shiksas* and *sheygitzes*. It may well be that he was testing a sensed hypocrisy in one-world political messages delivered by parents who, nonetheless, associated most comfortably with their own kind.

In Lewisberg, Pennsylvania, and the environment of Bucknell, he saw a testing ground. Viewing the place as the guest of a neighborhood kid who had gone up a year or so before, he concluded that he indeed shared his friend's good feelings.

> Lewisberg emanated an unpretentious civility that we could trust, rather than an air of privilege by which we might have been intimidated. To be sure, everything about the rural landscape and the small-town setting (and Miss Blake) [who had conducted his application interview] suggested an unmistakably gentile version of unpretentious civility, but by 1951 none of us thought it pretentious or unseemly that the momentum of our family's Americanization should have carried us, in half a century, from my Yiddish-speaking grandparents' hard existence in Newark's poorest ghetto neighborhood to this pretty place whose harmonious nativeness was proclaimed in every view. (*Facts* 46)

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The "us" indicates Roth's identification at the time—with *his* peers, *his* generation, rather than with Jewish tribalism. It also shows the extent to which the older generation of lower middle-class Jews took its cue for navigating the American academic landscape from its children.

When Roth began writing stories for a literary magazine he had helped found at Bucknell, his thoughts were not on things Jewish. His undergraduate fiction is as bleached, and about as tasty, as white bread. Indeed, as Roth put it himself, the stories,

> set absolutely nowhere, were mournful little things about sensitive children, sensitive adolescents, and sensitive young men crushed by coarse life. The stories were intended to be "touching"; without entirely knowing it, I wanted through my fiction to become "refined," to be elevated into realms unknown to the lower-middle-class Jews of Leslie Street. . . . To prove in my earliest undergraduate stories that I was a nice Jewish boy would have been bad enough; this was worse—proving that I was a nice boy, period. The Jew was nowhere to be seen; there were no Jews in the stories, no Newark, and not a sign of comedy—the last thing I wanted to do was hand anybody a laugh in literature. I wanted to show that life was sad and poignant, even while I was experiencing it as heady and exhilarating; I wanted to demonstrate that I was "compassionate," a totally harmless person. (*Facts* 60)

A harmless *non*person, he might have said, for without the Jewish sensibility that was introduced just a few years later into the *Goodbye, Columbus* stories, Roth's undergraduate fiction, for all its striving, was lifeless. Roth would be a writer about Jews, it seems, or no writer at all.

And five years after college, having just published his first volume, five of whose six stories involved the subject of Jewishness (and the sixth had a Jewish protagonist), feelings for his family and his people as he had remembered them in his childhood were, in general, very warm.[26] Indeed, fifteen years later still, in 1974, after numerous assaults on his allegiance to Jews and the accusations that he had betrayed his family in *Portnoy*, he could say,

> I am probably right now as devoted to my origins as I ever was in the days when I was indeed as powerless as little Freedman [the child protagonist of "The Conversion of the Jews"] and, more or less, had no other sane choice. But this has come about only after subjecting these ties and connections to considerable scrutiny. In fact, the affinities that I continue to feel toward the forces that first shaped me, having withstood to the degree that they have the assault of imagination and the test of sus-

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> tained psychoanalysis (with all the coldbloodedness *that* entails), would seem by now to be here to stay. Of course, I have greatly refashioned my attachments through the effort of testing them, and over the years have developed my strongest attachment to the test itself. (*RMAO* 9–10)

By that "assault of imagination" Roth meant having let his imagination play upon these materials over a period of time, having done, that is, the work of the fiction writer. Some part of that imagining involved his father, who represented in Roth's 1959 memoir of Bradley Beach summers, "my ideas of how difficult it was to be a man." Through a lifetime of fiction writing that difficulty remained close to consciousness in characters like Wallach, Portnoy, Tarnopol, Kepesh, Zuckerman, "Philip Roth," and Mickey Sabbath and even tempted Roth out of fiction into the chancier worlds of *The Facts* and *Patrimony*. But "the test itself," the writing of fiction rather than any particular subject matter, has been for most of these last several decades, Roth's "strongest attachment." Roth's 1974 reflection declared complementary articles of faith: he must live by being himself—a large part of which is Jewish—and by writing fiction, an activity not merely of telling but also of learning. By infinitely engaging himself on paper, even more than by a finite psychoanalysis, he would rework experience into art.

But "assault of imagination," the work of the fiction writer, Roth already knew in 1959, should begin in sympathy and neither flatter nor condemn its subject. So when the first reviews of *Goodbye, Columbus* praised Roth's artistic control and maturity, his having come into the literary world, as Saul Bellow would say, "with nails, hair, and teeth, speaking coherently,"[27] praise that was followed shortly by both the Jewish Book Council's Daroff Award (1959) and the National Book Award in fiction (1960), Roth should have had little reason to anticipate that characters and situations in his stories could be viewed as grotesques, as distortions used for condemning his own people. Indeed, some of the very stories that would receive the harshest treatment from his coreligionists received individual awards—the *Paris Review*'s Aga Khan Award for "Epstein" and inclusion of "The Conversion of the Jews" in the 1959 and "Defender of the Faith" in the 1960 editions of *The Best American Short Stories*.

Yet, even before the publication of the book, during the two or three years of magazine publication of some of the stories that would compose the book, Roth had begun to receive harsh reactions in letters to the editors; and before the reviewing season was out, from pulpits and in journals, Roth would be accused of portraying Jews as materialistic hedonists ("Goodbye, Columbus"), Rabbis as child abusers and hypocrites ("Conversion of the Jews"), Jewish soldiers as shirkers of duty ("Defender of the Faith"), Jewish

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fathers as philanderers ("Epstein"), and Jewish suburbanites as insensitive, ignorant assimilationists ("Eli, the Fanatic"). From Roth's standpoint, some of the characters he was "condemning" were actually characters of whom he was fond, all of them characters he felt he understood. None of them were meant to be whole categories of Jews—not *all* rabbis, or *all* fathers, or *all* soldiers, or *all* suburbanites. Some he had met "when [he] was indeed as powerless as little Freedman," before he had embarked on that distancing from powerlessness that was part of the artist's quest. Some of it, for example, the essential plot of and nonjudgmental attitude toward "Epstein" (*RMAO* 173), had been absorbed at family dinners presided over by Herman Roth, the "bard of Newark," a title conferred with the recollection: "That really rich Newark stuff isn't my story—it's his" (*Pat.* 181). Yet, while America was giving Roth the National Book Award, some spokesmen for organized Jewry were giving him the business. What was going on?

What was going on had as much to do with the state of American Jewry as with the literary venturings of Philip Roth. Postwar Jewry, still staggering from the revelations of the Holocaust, was reading Elie Wiesel's *Night*, and Andre Schwarz-Bart's *The Last of the Just* and producing Anne Frank's diary on Broadway. It was reading a literature of pride and propaganda such as Leon Uris's *Exodus*, whose stereotyping made all Jews saintly victims and by implication all critics persecutors. In America, Jews were moving from the cities to the suburbs and joining congregations and organizations to establish a new kind of Jewish life in the new communities. They were breaking down the barriers to medical and law school admissions, and in enormous numbers they were entering the graduate schools and establishing careers as academicians. In all this they were doubly sensitive of their image in the world and of the possibility of other holocausts. Whether what had happened in Hitler's Germany could happen in the United States was a constantly renewed topic of debate.

At the same time American Jewry was caught in a paradox as old as the history of its people, a conflict implicit in Judaism itself. For Judaism is at once a folk (or tribal) religion and a religion that proclaims universal principles. Since its rituals and references are grounded in the experience of the Jewish people, its teachings cannot simply be adopted by or grafted onto some other people having no continuity to Jewish history and life. Yet Judaism has always asserted that it has something to teach the world, and teaching requires contact. Within Judaism itself there have always been conflicts over the extent of that contact, extremists at one end preaching assimilationism and at the other end sanctifying xenophobia. And especially since the enlightenment there has been

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a sensed danger in the opening of the democracies, an anxiety that Western Jews have mostly suppressed. They have built great societies on the opportunity for integration and fulfillment. But the idea that personal fulfillment might include integration as one of its choices, or that integration might threaten group survival, is a paradox not easily acknowledged in the American Jewish consciousness. American Jews have not perceived themselves as having to declare for survival or for integration. As Charles S. Liebman has said,

> Most Jews are not interested in the articulation of either position. On the contrary, the typical Jew is more anxious to find an ideological position which denies the existence of any tension between survival and integration.[28]

What the "typical Jew" in the late fifties tended to do was to insist that Jews could be liberal, open to opportunity, loving of their people, and strong enough to resist finding any undue attraction in the values of the larger society. If tensions arose over intermarriage or loyalties within families, over perceptions of Israel, over liberalism and conservatism, over allegiances within the family of nations, the particular resolutions of these tensions were so articulated as to seem to be Jewish values, though they ". . . are not values per se . . . [but] only the means to strengthen what the Jewish community really considers most important: Jewish identity and communal survival."[29] So what was going on when Philip Roth published *Goodbye, Columbus* was far more complex than he might have been ready to understand.

In one sense, Roth might have already thought of himself as beyond any possible hubbub. For though he had found his true voice writing about New Jersey Jews, he had done so at a distance from Newark—while teaching in Chicago and Iowa and sliding toward his marriage with a gentile mother of two that would take place just as *Goodbye, Columbus* was being published. Roth's relationship with Margaret Martinson Williams would provide subject matter and perspective for his next several novels—and would eventually add "misogynist" to the epithets of his critics. That relationship would be his way of testing the gentile side of the American coin. But it was the Jewish side with which Roth would increasingly test the ring of the American dream, in fiction and criticism. And soon the response to his first volume would fix him in Jewish controversy for the next several decades. Robert Alter defined the fix two years before *Portnoy*:

> It is easy enough to imagine how exasperated a writer of serious ambition must feel to find himself trapped, as Roth has been, by his own initial success, securely tucked away by the public into a special pigeonhole of genre writing.[30]

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"Perhaps," suggested John Gross, "it would have been as well for Philip Roth if he hadn't been cited again and again as a leading member of the new school of American-Jewish novelists."[31] Gross saw the citation as a ". . . portentous . . . label hung round his neck," under whose weight, one was to infer, Roth was not ancient enough a mariner to navigate easily. While he would eventually make that albatross a subject for fiction in the Zuckerman books, his first response was to take on the criticism in serious literary forums. Roth's efforts, though irritating to his antagonists at the time, have been illuminating to critics ever since.

Roth's immediate forays, published as "Writing American Fiction" in *Commentary* of March 1961, "Some New Jewish Stereotypes" in *American Judaism* for Winter 1961,[32] and "Writing About Jews" in *Commentary* of December 1963,[33] explore problems raised by the realities of the new America: that the world of the tabloid was so bizarre that it stymied the imagination of the fiction writer, that Jewish kitsch neutered Jewish subject matter, and that establishment Jews saw self-criticism as stimulating anti-Semitism. In retrospect, the three essays seem to map territory for and chart courses into Roth's career. As manifestos, they identify the corruptions in American society that would frustrate his heroes; they justify bland plots in modern novels on the grounds that any momentous plotting must pale beside the horrendous realities revealed daily in the press; they score facile chauvinism; they even note that some young Jewish men, suffocating under the attentions of their mothers, envy the child neglect or abuse practiced by some gentile parents. This last phenomenon Roth discovered, not in his own notebooks, but as a recurring theme in fiction submitted by his Jewish students—half a dozen years before the writing of *Portnoy*. As Roth would declare in retrospect, these essays were not so much a deliberate program for the future as they were a defense of his past writing and an opportunity to take stock of the present.

> Because recognition—and with it, opposition—came to me almost immediately, I seem . . . to have felt called upon both to assert a literary position and to defend my moral flank the instant after I had managed to take my first steps. . . .[34]

Against the notion that he was a threat to the Jews, Wisse has said,

> he could argue, and did, that his mockery was only proof of their normalization, and that by doing what writers habitually do, singling out their own group for attention, he was showing confidence in their American security and strength.[35]

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It is noteworthy that Roth at this time, whatever he may have begun to find out about the world beyond Weequahic, still saw that world as open to him. Within a decade he would be increasingly fascinated by Kafka, whose works operate from the premise that the world is closed to their protagonists, probably because Kafka, from very early, had come to see the world as closed to himself, his family as having been inadequate to prepare him to live in it. But the happy child—father of the man—that had been Philip Roth had little in common with the blighted child that had been Franz Kafka.

Roth's three essay-manifestos also set out his "preoccupation with the relationship between the written and the unwritten world" (*RMAO* xi), a distinction articulated by Paul Goodman for the two planes on which a writer simultaneously lives. And over the decades, as Roth mingled imaginatively his changing sense of America, the Jews, and himself, he would find himself increasingly preoccupied with the "simple distinction (embracing a complex phenomenon)" (*RMAO* xi) implied by Goodman's term. For Roth, a distinction between the "written and unwritten worlds" was

> . . . more useful . . . than the distinction between imagination and reality, or art and life, first, because everyone can think through readily enough to the clear-cut differences between the two, and second, because the worlds that I feel myself shuttling between every day couldn't be more succinctly described. Back and forth, back and forth, bearing fresh information, detailed instructions, garbled messages, desperate inquiries, naive expectations, baffling new challenges . . . in all, cast somewhat in the role of Barnabas, whom the Land Surveyor K. enlists to traverse the steep winding road between the village and the castle in Kafka's novel about the difficulties of getting through. (*RMAO* xi–xii)

But the relationship between these two worlds would become more complex and less clear-cut as Roth's pursuit of fiction-making continued. True, every writer lives a life whose facts are different from and only imaginatively reconstructed or elaborated into the written world of his making. But Roth would come increasingly to view any life consciously experienced as a story with its own shadings and colorings. Fiction-making is not just imagining, it is also conceiving the goings on of real life: the unwritten world is never experienced uninterpreted. For Jews, the "people of the book," whose group experience is largely pinned, not to a place on the map but to lore and law—to an already existing written world—the separation is even more problematic. Increasingly Roth would see that the fixed fiction—the written world—is only arbitrarily fixed: to come closer to the unwritten reality it has to be ever more ambiguous, multidimensional, and contradictory. Writing fiction is not only carrying mes-

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sages across from the unwritten to the written world, it is living intensely without the comfort of finality. And the uncertainty inherent to being Jewish raises the intensity a few powers more. To his characterization of *The Castle* as "Kafka's novel about the difficulties of getting through" he adds that it is "also about what comes of taking yourself too seriously—or is it what comes of believing you are not being taken seriously enough? Or is that the same thing?" Comic self-deflation, Kafka's saving grace, would serve Roth well long after 1959.

At the time Roth wrote the materials of *Goodbye, Columbus*, his particular quest was to be a fiction writer, not a spokesman for Jews. He had come to understand that the good story was usually to be found close to home, to one's own experience; and his experience had been of neighborhood, of school, of the army, of starting out into the adult world, some of it the experience of Jews in conflict with aspects of America. Their accents he knew, their feelings he could explore, but he had no program of particular Jewish ideology, no strategy for Jewish, as against human, survival. His conflicts would be about authority and relative position, about going beyond the last rope with parents, teachers, officers, about going into the American landscape and beyond parochial bounds. And his imaginative assault was many sided: conjuring what it means to be a child, to be an expectant father, to be a middle-aged man despairing of his lost youth, to be a noncommissioned officer poised between the army establishment and the recruits—as Roth's father had been between officers of the great insurance company and lowly policyholders in the ghettos. Roth imagined their souls in conflict, sometimes in conflict with such Jewish survival mechanisms as keeping kosher, filling the table and everyone at it, building the business ostensibly for the children, joining the congregation (or the country club), revering the rabbi, seeing the psychiatrist (or the plastic surgeon), avoiding needless contact with the *goyim*.

Doubting the efficacy of these survival mechanisms could seem like attacking the Jews. And portraying mostly doubters, the young, the rebellious, the irreverent—albeit constrained by good Jewish upbringing—was asking for trouble from the guardians of Jewry in 1959. After all, where in the *Goodbye, Columbus* stories was the victim of anti-Semitism, was the saintly grandmother, was the rabbi sacrificing for his people, was the union organizer, was the Zionist leaving his books for the plow in Jezreel, was the assimilated tycoon realizing too late his loss of soul in having become a Jewish Bounderby? American Jewry may have been an amalgam of waves of immigration, settling differently into the American landscape. Grandees, Marxists, Zionists, Freudians may hardly have spoken to one another. But every present ripple of every past Jewish wave had its journal—and its reviewer seeking in vain for his Jew in this Jewish writer. That Roth was contemplating, as he would phrase it

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later, "the problematical nature of moral authority and of social restraint and regulation . . . the question of who or what shall have influence and jurisdiction over one's life" (*RMAO* 84) was not so apparent in the description of the Potamkins' wedding or of Eli Peck's cold dinner during his wife's "Oedipal experience" with her unborn baby.

As would more often be the case following publication of *Portnoy's Complaint*, anger at the details could blind one to the serious thesis beneath. And for all the sophistication of the Jewish reading public, their strongest tradition had a good strain of sentimentality—with its emphasis on family, mothers, children. For almost two centuries, sentimentality had been a hem against the unravelings of modernism, warding off threats of separation and chaotic invidualism. Roth would quickly be identified with attacks on mothers and family. Yet, in the periodicals over the decades critics would achieve much more consensus in condemning Roth in general than in identifying or analyzing specific evils in his work.

Roth's fiction mostly starts within the experience of a "human character," what he has called "the country's private life" (*RMAO* 122), never with contemplations of society as such. Any translation of individuals into social categories Roth leaves to the reader—or critic. He places his character in some heady experience and gives the reader, not analysis of its moral dilemma, but its smells, sights, voices, temperatures. At his best, he correlates these physical aspects with the moral dilemma: all those young men of appetite but not taste, of blocked expression but ample effusion are presented, as Hermione Lee points out, in

> novels . . . full of tasting and eating, licking and chewing, vomiting, regurgitating, weeping and excreting, and, conversely, of forbidden foods, constipated fathers, teachers with migraines, and women who prefer not to suck cocks or drink sperm. Roth is, preeminently, the novelist of orifices and blockages, of frustrated gratification.[36]

The major orifice in Roth's work is the mouth, locus of ingestion but also of speech, of saying, of storytelling, of wisecracking, of complaining, of informing, of declaring, of responding. Mouths are symbolically fed by mothers or substitute aunts or wives, self-stuffed by compulsives usually while spewing or ranting—the labial traffic moving in two directions—invaded by forbidden foods or sexual objects or organs, protected by dentists, usually failed doctors impotent to do more for a body than polish its smile. Little in Roth's novels centers on muscles or hands or backs or legs, except when the subject is baseball, the silent other side, the graceful representation, of at once individualism and belonging, of having made it in America.

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