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Ross Posnock: Philip Roth's Rude Truth

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Introduction: Roth Antagonistes

Decrying the “sanitized” eulogy he has just heard delivered over the coffin of his friend the novelist Nathan Zuckerman, who has suddenly died during heart surgery, an unidentified mourner, bearded and middle-aged, gives an impromptu countereulogy on the sidewalk:

He made it easy for them. Just went in there and died. This is a death we can all feel good about. Not like cancer. . . . The cancer deaths are horrifying. That’s what I would have figured him for. Wouldn’t you? Where was the rawness and the mess? Where was the embarrassment and the shame? Shame in this guy operated *always*. Here is a writer who broke taboos, fucked around, indiscreet, stepped outside that stuff deliberately, and they bury him like Neil Simon—Simonize our filthy, self-afflicted Zuck! Hegel’s unhappy consciousness out under the guise of sentiment and love! This unsatisfiable, suspect, quarrelsome novelist, this ego driven to its furthest extremes, ups and presents them with a palatable death—and the feeling police, the grammar police, they give him a palatable funeral with all the horseshit and the mythmaking! . . . I can’t get over it. He’s not even going to rot in the ground, this guy who was *made* for it. This insidious, unregenerate defiler, this irritant in the Jewish bloodstream, making people uncomfortable and angry by looking with a mirror up his own asshole, really despised by a lot of smart people, offensive to every possible lobby, and they put him away, decontaminated, deloused—suddenly he’s Abe Lincoln and Chaim Weizmann in one! Could this be what he *wanted*, this kosherization, this stenchlessness? I really had him down for cancer, the works. (C 217–19)

Reading this, we know where we are: the outrage, wit, excess, cadence, and above all the voice—the careening, over-the-top verbal intoxication that takes on a lyric life of its own, one of near giddy pleasure in its enraged vulgar onslaught; we are in a Philip Roth novel, in this case *The Counterlife*. Verbal energy overturns boundaries as Neil Simon consorts with Hegel, Zuckerman invades the collective body—“an irritant in the Jewish bloodstream”—while turning his own inside out—“looking with a mirror up his own asshole”—and words are set in motion: the bland laugh machine Neil Simon morphs into a verb—“Simonize”—that has the impossible task to polish and domesticate “our filthy, self-afflicted Zuck,” Nathan’s last name now a pungent monosyllable.

If the voice can be torrential and perfervid, it can also, even in its excess, be spare. Here is a vintage moment of the latter mode, a small aria to a man whom Roth calls “my kind of Jew”: “Worldly negativity. Seductive verbosity. Intellectual vengery. The hatred. The lying. The distrust. The this-worldliness. The truthfulness. The intelligence. The malice. The comedy. The endurance. The acting. The injury. The impairment” (OS 394). The voice is by now unmistakable, as indelible as Hemingway’s or Faulkner’s.

I have quoted the countereulogy for the pleasure of hearing Roth, but also because it can serve as his miniature self-portrait—albeit an inflamed and burlesqued one—which makes immediately vivid his investment in provoking genteel sensibilities, in embodying the unpalatable. Roth’s infamous mocking of bourgeois pieties is crucial to our sense of his literary identity and presence in contemporary culture. In fact, this is to say hardly more than that he is a modern writer; *épater le bourgeois* is modernism’s reflex. Yet who has made it so fertile a subject, a source of literary history, of comedy and pathos, who has made it more his own than American literature’s bad boy? *Portnoy’s Complaint* was the first novel to show a Jew “going wild in public”—“the last thing in the world a Jew is supposed to do”—and the sheer gusto of Roth’s portrait of a “‘cunt crazy’ masturbator of the respectable classes” caused a publishing sensation in 1969, and helped define the era’s raucous impiety (RMO 258, 256). Thanks to its assault on adulthood and restraint, the novel made the words *Roth* and *immaturity* seem a natural pairing. But the immaturity of *Portnoy’s Complaint*—exorbitant,

raw, regressive—is only one mode of immaturity, whose subtler incarnations have engaged not only Philip Roth but any number of writers, thinkers, and painters as they all explore less defended ways of being in the world.

As my preface suggests, Milan Kundera is one of Roth's chief interlocutors in this book, one of the figures whom I set in conversation with a novelist whose cosmopolitanism has for too long been hidden under the familiar rubric of Jewish American. Early on, conventional wisdom cast Roth in "the role of the rebellious Jewish son" and junior partner, born in Newark in 1933, of the firm Salinger, Bellow, Mailer, and Malamud (Wisse 317). While this grouping is more than the "journalistic cliché almost wholly devoid of content" Roth dismissed in 1981 (*RMO* 104), it has by now outlived its initial usefulness. For one thing, Roth's near half-century career of remarkable, indeed relentless, productivity—since 1959 twenty-two works of fiction and five of nonfiction—has left such early and parochial rubrics in the dustbin of literary history. And he has gone far from home (if only to return in *The Plot Against America*, which seven-year-old Philip Roth narrates). For thirteen years Roth lived in London half the year; for five years in the seventies he was a regular visitor to Prague, where he "took a little crash course in political repression," became close with several writers, including Kundera, and was pivotal in publishing the English translations of some of the leading works of postwar Eastern European literature (*RMO* 140). Roth's own books have a large international audience (they have been translated into over thirty languages, and in fall 2004 two were best sellers in France). All of these experiences, including his permanent return to the United States in 1989, which renewed his sense of the country and became a catalyst for his American trilogy (1997–2000), have significantly enlarged and deepened his art.

Roth's cosmopolitanism has created a body of work that is best understood in an international context—American, European, and Eastern European. The main effort of this book is to construct these overlapping frames of reference, using them as a resource for literary criticism of the fiction, and making vivid Roth's creative engagement with a rich lineage of intellectual history. Threading together my multiple contexts

is the subject of immaturity. As a fertile homegrown resistance to the renunciations required by adulthood, immaturity began to appear as such in the American renaissance of the mid–nineteenth century as part of romanticism’s celebration of the child and of spontaneity.¹ This open, unguarded sensibility, earlier discounted by Enlightenment scientism and rationalism but in touch with Renaissance humanism, would come to inspire one current of international modernism, including the work of a number of European and Eastern European novelists and thinkers. While the separate branches of this romantic and modernist lineage are well known, their convergence upon the subject of immaturity and in the work of a single capacious novelist remains to be explored.

By redescribing this distinct current in modern thought, I hope to enlarge and clarify our understanding of a writer confined for too long to rather befuddled received opinion that sees him (and his narrators) as “uneasily poised between the bourgeois Jewish family that hemmed him in and the Christian cold shoulder that nudged him out . . . it was never clear where he thought he belonged or to what he owed allegiance” (Wisse 318). This response, with its trace of exasperation at Roth’s elusiveness, is a perennial one to the cosmopolitan evasion of fixed identity.²

Roth is actively defying the trajectory of most major twentieth-century American novelists, whether earlier figures such as Faulkner and Hemingway or his original cohort of Bellow, Mailer, Malamud. Critics generally agree that the later work of all these writers marks a falling off from their prime. But the preponderance of major novels in Roth’s career, by my estimate, leans toward the later decades: *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969), *The Counterlife* (1986), *Sabbath’s Theater* (1995), and *The Human Stain* (2000) comprise the first rank, closely followed by *The Ghost Writer* (1979), *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), *Operation Shylock* (1993), *American Pastoral* (1997), and *The Dying Animal* (2001). In Roth’s surge in the nineties and into the next century, with *The Plot Against America* (2004) and *Everyman* (2006), he has published eleven books, nine of which were novels, and five of which were distinguished works. This is unprecedented in American letters of the twentieth century. Late Roth is now beginning to deserve comparison with what is

usually regarded as the summit of late turns of novelistic genius—Henry James’s major phase at the start of the century.

It is tempting to see the sketch above as charting a triumphal march from Jewish Newark to the WASP throne of literary greatness—a hymn to cultural assimilation by a gradual sacrifice or bleaching out of ethnicity. Indeed, Roth has said of his Jewish cohort, each of us “found his own means of transcending the immediate parochialism of his Jewish background” (*RMO* 108). In fact, Roth’s own means of transcendence was not the familiar route of assimilation hinted at above but rather something closer to its opposite—what I will be calling “appropriation,” a word borrowed from Emerson, who borrowed it from Goethe, and a word also crucial to Ralph Ellison, who understood all of culture as an “appropriation game” (*Collected* 511). A writer Roth much admires, Ellison, in using the term, builds upon the thinking of a mentor, the philosopher Alain Locke, and upon W.E.B. DuBois. Henry James, another Roth favorite, also figures here, for without using the word *appropriation* he makes vivid the spirit of its practice when he says “to be an American is a great preparation for culture . . . we can deal freely with forms of civilization not our own, can pick and choose and . . . claim our property wherever we find it” (*Letters* 1:77). To rewrite assimilation as appropriation banishes the whole melodrama of assimilation whereby the outsider is required to cast off old (ethnic) ways for new and submit to a culture assumed to possess a stable, homogenous identity; this sacrificial process affirms a hierarchy of insider/outsider, native/alien grounded in blood and origin.³

By contrast, all that appropriation requires is a good library. It houses what DuBois famously called “the kingdom of culture” where the color line of Jim Crow America does not obtain. “I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not,” as DuBois memorably noted in 1903 (365). Aesthetic bliss escapes, however temporarily, the long arm of history. The formulation tentatively floated above—Roth’s career as “the triumphal march” to WASP literary greatness—is deflated when we recall the importance of the Newark Public Library for the young Philip Roth. Raised in a lower-middle-class Jewish neighborhood, in a house that contained few books, Roth treasured the library as the arena for claiming his public property. He begins his career in effect by honoring

this kingdom and its importance as a haven for ethnic and racial outsiders. *Goodbye, Columbus* is partly about a lower-middle-class Jewish librarian in Newark's grand public library and a poor black boy who haunts the place and is in love with Gauguin's paintings. The librarian briefly befriends the boy, helps him gain access to the art books, and urges him to get a library card. The story ends with the librarian, after a bitter breakup with a girl from a wealthy Jewish family, staring into another library, observing a wall of books needing to be shelved. The "kingdom of culture," free of racial and class barriers, beckons him back to a life among books.

One of the objects in the public domain Roth appropriated was Henry James. Roth tells us in his memoir *The Facts* that *The Portrait of a Lady* "had been a virtual handbook during the early drafts of *Letting Go*," his first novel (157). Far from concealing this inspiration, Roth builds it into the plot: his Jewish graduate student protagonist is writing a dissertation on James. So perhaps I was too hasty in having discarded my prior formulation; let me amend it: one of the reasons Philip Roth acquires James's mantle is not because of an act of cultural passing in which Roth appears in WASP-face, but rather because Roth's literary sensibility is distinctly cosmopolitan in James's appropriative sense.

Greek for "world citizen," *cosmopolitan* is rarely a neutral term and often pejorative because it usually involves a refusal to revere local or national authority and a desire to uphold multiple affiliations. In an academic culture obsessed by identity, the cosmopolitan has the distinction of being grounded instead in the practice of appropriation: insouciance regarding claims of ownership and the drawing of boundaries becomes the basis of a cosmopolitan relation to culture. To achieve it liberates culture from the proprietary grip of a single group; possessiveness—of the dismal and familiar "jazz is a black thing, Shakespeare a white" sort—is set aside for sampling, fixity for mobility. Cosmopolites refuse to know their place. And cosmopolitanism, which challenges the sense of entitlement to cultural riches assumed to repose in privileged birth or inheritance, is, in theory at least, what democratic America embodies.⁴ Recall that James said "to be an American is a great

preparation for culture.” Here is Ellison’s version, from his famous evocation at the start of *Shadow and Act* of his freewheeling Oklahoma youth in the 1920s. The state’s blacks “were often charged by exasperated white Texans with ‘not knowing their place,’” and Ellison and his friends proved them right (*Collected* 50). As self-styled “renaissance” men, he and his friends sampled literature, art, and music high and low; “we were ‘boys,’ members of a wild, free, outlaw tribe which transcended the category of race. Rather we were Americans” (52). Here is Roth’s version: “I would think that much of the exuberance with which I and others of my generation of Jewish children seized our opportunities after the war—that wonderful feeling that one was entitled to no less than anyone else, that one could do anything and could be excluded from nothing—came from our belief in the boundlessness of the democracy in which we lived and to which we belonged” (*F* 123).

Belonging, then, does not conflict with this sense of cosmopolitanism as appropriation; indeed Roth is a great regionalist, the laureate of New Jersey who has made his old Newark neighborhoods a living presence in many of his books. He has said that “the great American writers are regionalists. It’s in the American grain” (qtd. Alvarez 17). Since the motor of Roth’s sensibility is contradiction (Kierkegaard’s very Emersonian sentiment “the whole content of my being shrieks in contradiction against itself” is an epigraph to *Operation Shylock*), the regional and cosmopolitan interact—the one containing the other—in productive ferment.

Ethnicity is also within the American grain. Jewishness for Roth was “wholly secularized” in his words, but remained the source of a distinct cultural style: of satiric wit, contentiousness, and irreverence, all useful attributes for playing the American game of appropriation. Roth speaks of his graduate school days at the University of Chicago in the mid-fifties as a time when he and his friends did not submit to a sacrificial ritual of assimilation but rather brought to their confrontation with high literary culture a “playful confidence” in their Jewishness as an “intellectual resource. It was also a defense against overrefinement, a counterweight to the intimidating power of Henry James and literary good taste generally, whose ‘civilizing’ function was variously tempting to

clever ambitious city boys” at ease with their own casual coarseness. He and his friends would refer to Isabel Archer as a “shiksa,” and “much scrupulosity was expended determining if Osmond wasn’t really a Jew” (*F* 123, 115). In *Letting Go* and later in *The Ghost Writer* Roth, as we will see in chapter 3, reveals a subtler understanding of James as not simply the paragon of refinement but an interrogator of its limits, not only a target but an ally.

The freedom of appropriation can produce some stunning, very American, anomalies: Roth, perennial “bad boy” and the preeminent Jewish novelist of his generation, enters American high culture by appropriating James as crucial inspiration in his career-long assault on all that James is conventionally said to embody—the cultural and moral prestige of refinement, good taste, seriousness, maturity. Although famous as the impeccable Master, James also deflated mastery, relishing bewilderment and vulnerability and abjectness. He flaunts these qualities in his autobiography *A Small Boy and Others*, in the New York chapters of *The American Scene*, his account of his return to his native land, and in some of his most important fictional characters (Lambert Strether, for example), as part of his strategic resistance to the rigidity of bourgeois character structure, its anal deformations, as Theodor Adorno called them.⁵ James shares this assault on propriety with a number of his canonical predecessors, among them Melville and Whitman. Above all, as we will shortly see, Emerson is the key figure in revising the dominant models of rationality and maturity bequeathed by the Enlightenment. And Roth, I will argue, discerns that his antinomian predecessors’ dismantling of rationalist, disciplinary models of knowledge, of success, and of selfhood is a countercultural endowment that he is free to use for his own purposes. Indeed, the title of his first novel, *Letting Go*, can be read as a neat summary of what the countermodel proposes as the goal of the dismantling—a relaxing of the constricted psyche.

Now my prior formulation of Roth’s long march toward Jamesian preeminence can be more precisely revised: Like James before him, Roth seeks to fashion a creative immaturity. Henry James turns out to be a nexus where two of the major themes of this book—cosmopolitan appropriation and immaturity—intersect. Both James and Roth disrupt

modes of static, anchored isolation: the proprietary (culture as elitist, private preserve) and propriety (the self as defended and fortified).

It is not accidental that the Czech and Polish authors who are among those Roth most admires—Milan Kundera, Václav Havel, Witold Gombrowicz, and Bruno Schulz—are powerful theorists of immaturity. They fashion it, each in their own way, as a stance against the coerced conformity of totalitarian oppression. Immaturity, then, is always political for the Eastern Europeans I will discuss in chapter 2. It is true as well of the predecessor I most consistently invoke—Emerson. Initially this may be puzzling, for Emerson is conventionally regarded as the faintly embarrassing guardian of our most cherished American *isms*: optimism, exceptionalism, individualism, ahistoricism. But reading Emerson through Roth brings “Experience” and “Circles” center stage, the speaker of inadmissible, uncensored truth whom Nietzsche revered and described as containing “so many ‘possibilities’ that even virtue achieves esprit in his writings” (qtd. Buell 239). While the Emerson to be found here is a prophet of possibility, this is admittedly not the whole of Emerson—missing, for instance, are the metaphysician and transcendentalist. But I conduct my appropriation in an Emersonian spirit: I treat him neither as a static touchstone for the ages nor as only embedded in his historical moment. Instead, he emerges as a fluid, metamorphic, living presence who thrives on the antagonistic energy released when one “abstain[s] from dogmatism and recognize[s] all the opposite negations, between which, as walls,” one’s “being is swung” (*Essays* 426). Two of the great enemies of ideology and of bourgeois pieties, Emerson and Nietzsche share with Roth a love of agonistic combat and rude truth.

Given Emerson’s elusiveness it is not surprising that he has a complex relation to the Enlightenment’s twin pillars, maturity and reason. His renovation of both terms prompted a new way to think about immaturity. In 1784 Kant published his famous “motto” for the Enlightenment—“have the courage to use your *own* understanding!” Only by thinking for himself does man emerge from his “self-incurred immaturity” (58). (The gender exclusiveness of this will soon concern us.) “It is so easy to

be immature,” remarks Kant; all one need do is rely on the panoply of authorities that surround one—starting with the books one reads. But maturity requires, says Kant, that one always “look within oneself . . . for the supreme touchstone of truth” (qtd. Schmidt 17). This reverence for the spiritual sanctity of the individual’s inwardness and his access to intuitive truth unattached to empirical evidence is one reason Kantian idealism was welcomed in 1830s New England intellectual culture, inspiring the transcendentalism of Emerson and his circle. Kantianism was also a philosophical ground of romanticism, that other liberating European current of thought then intoxicating American intellectuals. Both movements granted the mind’s shaping powers of perception an unprecedented dignity, a respect for inwardness that developed out of an earlier foundational tenet of Enlightenment, Descartes’s cogito—“I think therefore I am”—and its bracketing of custom and tradition. The self as the product of its own making has been called Descartes’s “truly novel emphasis” and explains what made his ideas so “naturally” adaptable to the United States, as Tocqueville famously noted (Smith 23).⁶

In the 1830s Samuel Taylor Coleridge was a key mediator of Romantic and Kantian thought to New England, and he borrowed his crucial distinction—between reason and understanding—from Kant. “I think it a philosophy itself,” an excited Emerson said of this distinction, for it furnished an alternative to what was stultifying in Descartes—his deadening reduction of reason to mathematical certainty and calculation, a reduction that entailed the stark divorce of reason from emotions. In light of Coleridge’s Kantian terms, this impoverishing dimension of the Enlightenment legacy could be averted. Now Cartesian reason was resituated as closer to understanding, which Emerson in an 1834 letter characterized as a “wrinkled calculator” who “toils all the time, compares, contrives, adds, argues” and relies on the “expedient” and “customary.” In contrast, reason, according to an enthusiastic Emerson in the same letter, “is the highest faculty of the soul—what we mean often by the soul itself; it never *reasons*, never proves, it simply perceives; it is vision. . . . The thoughts of youth & ‘first thoughts’ are the revelations of Reason” (*Letters* 133). And poetry is one of the things that resides in the province of reason.⁷

Most striking is Emerson's paradoxical formulation that reason "never *reasons*," for it embodies the impatience of youth, what in "Self-Reliance" he extols as the "nonchalance" of a boy—"independent, irresponsible"—who "cumbers himself never about consequences, about interests" (*Essays* 261). "Whim" is the brusque boy's angle of vision, his zigzagging moodiness in tune with nature's incessant, incorrigible movements. Emerson's audacious reversal of Enlightenment reason and maturity also feeds on the anarchy and spontaneity latent and untapped in Kant's demand to shed reliance on authority and to think for oneself.⁸ Emersonian anti-Enlightenment reason forms the basis of the exhilarating, defiant immaturity that Emerson calls self-reliance. His undoing and remaking of reason and maturity can be regarded as a model for what Emerson means by abstaining from dogmatism so as to recognize "all the opposite negations." For the self, as if an extension of nature, is split by volatility and ambivalence; and Emerson invites us to stay attuned to this by inhabiting contradiction and perversity. Both will, in his word, give "edge" to one's feelings: "your goodness must have some edge to it—else it is none. The doctrine of hatred must be preached as the counteraction of the doctrine of love when that pules and whines" (262).

Reason "never *reasons*" and maturity is never mature: in this book, maturity suffers a reversal analogous to Cartesian rationalism when exposed to Emersonian reason. The premise of Kant's notion of Enlightenment, maturity, is emptied of its project of mastery and remade in effect as immaturity, disrespectful of dogma, authority, bounded form—all that insulates one from a more open, less censored engagement with the moment. Rather than goal centered, immaturity is ludic, seeking not to dominate but to enter the turbulent flow of what Emerson calls "counteraction" and Roth will call "counterlife": rhythms that prosper in the refractory domain of the aesthetic, if we allow that term to include visceral ways of being in the world.

Immaturity, as it appears in canonical American fiction, to speak broadly and schematically, comes in two main varieties: one is the insouciant impurity and mobility—disguise, cross-dressing, interracial friendship—sponsored by Huck Finn, who, ultimately, "lights out for

the territory” (thus inaugurating a legacy of misogynist escapism that is particularly visible in famous mid-1950s fiction, as we will note below). The other is the antiescapist imperative of immersion that Isabel Archer enacts. She is brought low from heights of self-idealization. Toward the end she descends, in effect, from vertical to horizontal—she imagines with pleasure relaxing into a “cool bath in a marble tank,” ready “to cease utterly, to give it all up,” and soon slips into Ralph’s deathbed to comfort him (*Portrait* 465).⁹ Isabel’s loosening of executive will plays havoc with the undertaking of projects—what preoccupied the younger and more rigid Isabel—and this relaxing captured Roth’s imagination from early on. But not until his late fiction does Isabel’s lowering most powerfully exert itself.

Roth has described his most flagrant performance of (Huck Finnish) immaturity, *Portnoy’s Complaint*, as very much of its historical moment—the “demythologizing decade” of the sixties when presumably sacrosanct and permanent institutions and values toppled, rousing the “most propagandized generation of young people in American history”—his own “silent” generation—into a collective shattering of pieties (*RMO* 77). Having established in the early sixties his “maturity credentials” with two “indisputably earnest” novels, Roth felt that now the time was right to start burnishing his immaturity credentials (*RMO* 104). To continue his self-confessed “pursuit of the unserious” begun in *Portnoy*, Roth wrote a book about baseball, *The Great American Novel* (1973), whose hero calls Melville and Hawthorne “my precursors, my kinsmen,” saluting their earlier endeavors to take the measure of America. By then Roth was, in his words, feeling an “increased responsiveness to and respect for, what is unsocialized” in himself, as the “infectious volatility” of the era “was inspiring feats of self-transformation and self-experimentation in virtually everyone” (*RMO* 76, 80, 66). This mix of elements—the iconoclasm and fluidity of the times, which invited reinvention and exploration of the unserious and unsocialized within, and the turn to canonical predecessors for inspiration—together would form the seedbed of a rich immaturity from which would emerge his finest works in the ensuing decades.

Roth was hardly the only person in the late sixties who “worked long

