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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

and hard and diligently” to be “frivolous.” Immaturity was by then a pronounced cultural style. Recall Abbie Hoffman writing in *Woodstock Nation* prior to his conspiracy trial in 1968:

When I appear in the Chicago courtroom, I want to be tried not because I support the National Liberation Front—which I do—but because I have long hair. Not because I support the black liberation movement, but because I smoke dope. Not because I am against a capitalist system, but because I think property eats shit. Not because I’m against corporate liberalism, but because I think people should do whatever the fuck they want. And not because I am trying to organize the working class, but because I think kids should kill their parents. Finally, I want to be tried for having a good time and not being serious. (Qtd. Mattessich 6–7)

This spirited enunciation of a flagrantly immature politics offers a series of truculent either-or assertions that seem to empty out the political of anything but defiance.

Hoffman’s kind of immaturity, aggressively antidialectical, is amusing but more sterile than creative. So is the immaturity of the fictional Dean Moriarty of Kerouac’s *On the Road*. The ultimate hipster and “holy goof-ball,” virtually a Platonic model of midcentury American bad boy immaturity, Dean is oblivious to norms or routine, feasts insatiably on what comes his way, relies on his prodigious energy to get the maximum kicks. Driving back and forth the length of the United States whenever, Dean’s anarchic, improvised life of spontaneity mocks obligation and is at first exhilarating to his friend Sal. In his openness and immunity to inhibition, Dean’s consciousness is rapturous, pure, sensuous receptivity. But, finally, for all his energy, an air of futility surrounds him, exhausting Sal and everyone else. The painful ending, when a desperate Dean arrives impromptu in New York to see his old friend only to be turned away, expresses Kerouac’s own unease with Dean’s empty freedom.

Immaturity as valiant protest against spiritual torpor is not confined to hipster hedonism. Bourgeois intellectuals are also drawn to it. Consider Saul Bellow’s Moses Herzog, who late in *Herzog* (1964) recalls that a navy psychiatrist during the war diagnosed him as “unusually immature. I knew that, but professional confirmation caused me deep anguish. In anguish I was not immature” (323). A part-time professor and

intellectual historian in a malaise over his second divorce, Herzog is a self-confessed failure. But his refusal of ambition and success has been in part an effort to be free to cultivate his own thoughts and feelings independent of the postwar Left's romantic contempt for modernity. Their attitude is full of "the commonplaces of the Wasteland outlook, the cheap mental stimulants of Alienation, the cant and rant of pip-squeaks about Inauthenticity and Forlornness" (75). A playful, impulsive immaturity disavows such numbing grimness and becomes an alternative to the resentment and suffocating sense of "grievance" that for Herzog afflicts his generation, one that has made its motto not God is Dead but "Death is God"—the belief that "nothing faithful, vulnerable, fragile can be durable or have any true power" (290).

Fragile, vulnerable, guileless, cuckolded, charming, and childish, Herzog is a specialist "in spiritual self-awareness" who tries "to keep alive primordial feelings of a certain sort." If this sounds fuzzy, it is; vagueness is one of Herzog's failings: he is a man "of strong impulses, even faith, but lacked clear ideas" (307, 93). With limited success, he seeks to make his life a sustained escape from the fashionable negativity that has conquered "the powers of soul" by "substituting hate for love"; "this hatred of the present has not been well understood," he notes (163; Bellow, *It All Adds Up* 113). Seized by the need to explain and clarify his and the century's spiritual crisis, Herzog writes letters to the living and the dead; "to God," for instance, "he jotted several lines"). He has tried, to quote a famous passage, "bucking such trends . . . obstinately, defiantly, blindly but without sufficient courage or intelligence, tried to be a *marvelous* Herzog, a Herzog who, perhaps clumsily, tried to live out marvelous qualities, vaguely comprehended" (325, 93). Whitman is one of his inspirations in becoming "marvelous": just as he recalls the diagnosis of immaturity from 1942, he describes himself as having reached an "unusually free condition of mind. 'In paths untrod-den,' as Walt Whitman marvelously put it, 'Escaped from the life that exhibits itself . . . ' Oh, that's a plague, the life that exhibits itself, a real plague! . . . an overflow of narcissism" (323–24). Herzog, a descendant of Isabel Archer's immersive immaturity, is weary of the "bone-breaking burden of selfhood and self-development," and has contempt for therapeutic upward mobility. He anticipates Roth's Whitmanic

Mickey Sabbath, a more bodily rendering of Herzog's erudite and fragile dissent from adulthood (93).

What would a creative immaturity look like? Herzog believes "there are human qualities still to be discovered" once man can cease taking "revenge upon himself, a revenge of derision, contempt, denial of transcendence" (164). It has been said, reports Herzog, that "in man, self-awareness has been accompanied" by a loss of "natural powers, of a price paid by instinct, by sacrifices of freedom, impulse" (163). What Herzog seems to be summarizing without saying so is the Frankfurt school thesis of the dialectic of Enlightenment. It exposes Enlightenment's self-defeating character: the self, to preserve itself, must curtail its range of affect and sacrifice its impulsive vitality (a logic that also fascinates Roth, as we will see).

One of the authors of the thesis was Theodor Adorno. Although Adorno's notorious negativity would make him a sworn enemy of Herzog's, they actually share an interest in escaping the dialectic of Enlightenment by cultivating immaturity. Like Emerson's rewriting of Enlightenment maturity as the insouciance of "self-reliance," the dialectic of Adorno and his collaborator, Max Horkheimer, is an effort to elude the calculating and ascetic consciousness bequeathed by the Cartesian and (in their emphasis) Baconian reduction of reason to the instrument of abstraction.¹⁰ For Adorno, maturity is purchased at a grim cost to the self: to dominate external nature, which is the imperative of scientific progress as Bacon described it, demands that one subjugate one's inner nature. Maturity denies inner nature for the sake of self-preservation. The impulse to be free from self-incurred maturity (to invert Kant) creates the temptation to relax vigilance by tapping the "uncurtailed primal element" in the self and releasing unharnessed affect—openness, vulnerability, the spontaneous impulses of curiosity and imitation (all part of what Adorno calls the "mimetic heritage" of childhood). To reconnect to mimetic impulse is to enliven thinking: "Audacious reflection," remarks Adorno, "wants to give thought what cautious reflection drove out of it—naïveté" (*Notes* 2:219). The ban on naïveté, like the taboo on the mimetic in general, fortifies "normality," which, for Adorno, is part of the "sickness proper to the epoch." Adorno's project is to abolish neither the Enlightenment nor maturity but to "release

[them] from entanglement in blind domination,” from a pinched psychic economy of survival and scarcity (Adorno and Horkheimer xvi). In this release “amazement is rediscovered . . . an astonishment at individual things . . . emphatically opposed to the power of convention, which is a dingy lens in front of the eye” (*Notes* 2:219).¹¹ Particularity and detail blossom.

According to Jürgen Habermas, who was Adorno’s student, his former professor “never accepted the alternatives of remaining childlike or growing up; he wanted neither to put up with infantilism nor to pay the cost of a rigid defense against regression, even were it to be ‘in the service of the I.’ In him there remained vivid a stratum of early experiences and attitudes . . . in free communication with his thought—opened, as it were, to his intellect. The vulnerability of the senses and the unshockability of a thought free from anxiety belonged together” (104). Refusing the bad options of the helpless infant or the insulated adult, Adorno elected a vulnerability that became a capacious receptivity to experience that quickened thought. In the next chapter, I will call this mode a “mature immaturity” (borrowing a phrase of Gombrowicz’s). The “uncurtailed primal element” in Adorno flourished, as Habermas observes, thanks to the protective devotions of his wife.

This last point raises the question of immaturity’s relation to gender. Is it solely a male privilege? *On the Road* suggests it is. Recall the venting of rage against Dean by his circle of betrayed women; they have been footing the bill, long overdue, for his immaturity. And they will never be reimbursed; there is no reciprocity in this arrangement. The same could be said of Herzog’s numerous affairs with women who variously indulge him. The obligations imposed upon the maternal figure by children and husbands tacitly demand that she remain fixed and reliable and responsible in presiding over the household and marriage. This demand seems socially to stigmatize deviance from this role in ways not analogous to the male escape from responsible fatherhood and adulthood. There are of course a number of women writers who depict and make use of a “mature immaturity”—Sylvia Plath, Jane Bowles, and Carson McCullers come to mind as midcentury instances, and Gertrude Stein and Zora Neale Hurston are some earlier ones. But these earlier figures seem

exceptions that prove a rule: that the burden of maturity on women seems far heavier than on men, as if the punishments meted out to nineteenth-century characters who flee the maternal—Emma Bovary and her American counterpart Edna in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*—remain cautionary. The fact that Plath, Bowles, and McCullers are at least as famous for their lavishly self-destructive lives as for their work suggests that immaturity may be a subject that brings life and art into dangerous proximity for women writers. Bluntly put, for most women writers, as for black authors, the pressure of exemplarity makes anarchic immaturity too costly.¹² For instance, by the end of Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) we witness a turn away from immaturity, after immersion in riot and chaos, in the protagonist’s (incipient) achievement of responsibility implied in the title’s second word. And Carson McCullers’s *The Member of the Wedding* (1946) subtly avoids immaturity even as it abolishes maturity and embraces the Freak as normality’s secret sharer. Yet it does so not by warring against the family and the domestic but by reconfiguring them as part of a larger loosening of conventional gender roles. Ironically, if flagrant immaturity is an unaffordable luxury for American women writers of this era, historically women have been confined to the political and legal status of the immature.¹³

To open up the matter of gender and Roth is of course to enter a notorious minefield. Perhaps only Norman Mailer has so provoked readers. Many regard Roth’s work not as liberating but as testament to his numbingly repetitive, misogynistic, priapic obsessions, charges reprised upon the publication of *The Dying Animal* in 2001. If Roth will always remain beyond the pale for some, that may be the risk of creating indelible portraits of men embodying and suffering the deformities of American masculinity. The crux of the gender question for Roth concerns aesthetic distance: does Roth possess it, or do his characters’ obsessions override any aesthetic control he might exert? I believe Roth usually maintains aesthetic detachment; how else, for instance, could he compose the unsparing portrait of a compulsive misogynist in *The Dying Animal* or of the increasingly shrill and lost boy Alexander Portnoy? These pitch-perfect renderings of first-person narrative voice bespeak an artist whose detachment frees him to inhabit a fictive psyche

while simultaneously exposing it, immersing the reader in disturbing human complexity. But when his hysterical, narcissistic males are not imprisoning women in fantasies that attenuate their humanity, Roth accords female figures a depth of characterization; those I have in mind include Lucy Nelson, the protagonist of his underrated second novel *When She Was Good*, Michelle Cowan in *Sabbath's Theater*, and Faunia Farley and Delphine Roux, two risky figures from *The Human Stain*.

Yet risk of offense attends Roth's depictions of either gender because he abjures the very notion of "balance" as a threat to the freedom from "appropriateness" that literature perhaps uniquely offers (*RMO* 195). Aesthetic distance becomes the condition whereby literature can traffic in the unbalanced, that realm where the uncensored, the anxious and exaggerated come to imaginative life, typically under pressure of a character's analytic scrutiny, sometimes self-generated (ignited often by rage, frustration, desperation), or supplied by the older Nathan Zuckerman's interpretive, empathic narration, or elicited in the back-and-forth in a therapist's office. Male lust, in Roth's work, is the most immediate vehicle for shattering the constraints of balance; but male sexuality operates, ultimately, as much metaphorically as literally, a metaphor for how any of us find ways to keep at bay, however temporarily, the obligations to be appropriate, moderate, agreeable, virtuous.¹⁴ But if the chaos of desire keeps these idealized expectations (precariously) at some remove, sexuality in Roth does not achieve the status, say, of a Lawrentian redemptive wholeness joining man and woman. Neither erotic nor lyrical, but raw and explicit, sexuality in Roth's portrayal as easily enslaves and isolates as emancipates.

Finally, Roth is most interested not in sexuality per se but the larger power of which it is part—the "unsocialized," to use his word quoted earlier, that zone of the psyche where the capacity for resistance and renewal resides. And this release of the unsocialized—"the full play of all things"—is "why the novel matters," to borrow Lawrence's phrases (533, 538). The genre's special preserve is its avid and intimate access to private life, the distinctive domain of Roth's unbalanced fiction, which mimics the anarchy of the uncensored in artifacts of relentless verbal energy. The force of the unsocialized and the force of literature are symbiotic, and both release us from bondage to the correct and approved. The

ensuing liberation is always hedged; more than once it occurs at the eleventh hour as death looms (as the examples of Silk and Sabbath suggest). In suggesting the “absurdities” that would ensue if one confused a “balanced portrayal” with a novel, Roth imagines an irate reader’s letter: “‘Dear Fyodor Dostoevsky—All the students in our school . . . feel that you have been unfair to us. Do you call Raskolnikov a balanced portrayal of students as we know them? Of Russian students? Of poor students? What about those of us who have never murdered anyone, who do our homework every night?’ . . . Dear Vladimir Nabokov—‘The girls in our school . . . and so on.’” Most readers and writers are drawn to literature, Roth remarked in the early 1960s, to discover “all that is beyond simple moral categorizing” (*RMO* 199, 195).¹⁵

Roth accounts for at least part of the notoriety and derision that came his way after *Portnoy* as a failure of his readership to respect or understand aesthetic distance; *Portnoy*, a “novel in the guise of a confession,” was read as a “confession in the guise of a novel” (*RMO* 254).¹⁶ A famous quip of the era was the novelist Jacqueline Susann’s remark on the *Tonight Show* that she’d like to meet Roth but didn’t want to shake his hand. But this ignores what Roth considers the “fundamental novelistic gift”—the “art of impersonation” (123). The confusion of life and art is one of his consuming subjects, as all his readers know, one he renders with ever more audacity and inventiveness—witness *The Facts*, *Operation Shylock*, and *The Plot Against America*. The first is Roth’s memoir that he addresses to a fictional character who appends to it a long critique; the last two are novels with protagonists named “Philip Roth” (indeed *Shylock* has two such characters!). Because he deliberately blurs the line between art and life, Roth is often accused of encouraging readers to abolish aesthetic distance and confuse him with his characters.¹⁷ Actually, his aim is more complicated—he imperils the boundary to expose how permeable it is and always has been. Reality and artifice routinely interpenetrate in the presentation of self in everyday life, as Erasmus, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Erving Goffman, Henry James, and other keen social analysts have been telling us for centuries. To grasp our inherent theatricality is valuable to the extent that it sparks critical scrutiny of the inveterate American reflex to look through artifice to the (alleged) real, as if the two are neatly separable

and antithetical. Roth, in short, seeks to challenge the cherished and abiding myth of the natural. This inquiry, which he extends to a number of our unexamined certitudes, is initiated in *The Counterlife*, culminates in *The Human Stain*, and defines one of the central concerns of his late fiction.

If issues of gender lead to questions about Roth's complex sense of the relation between art and life, the latter matter evolves into another distinctive dimension of Roth's oeuvre—that his art creates a world unto itself, as if one vast twenty-volume novel. “It's all one big book you write anyway,” he has remarked (*RMO* 138). After all, eight novels (including two trilogies) are presided over by Nathan Zuckerman, three by David Kepesh, and two are narrated by Philip Roth. This recursiveness creates a degree of hermeticism, a condition that has another source as well—in the running commentary his work provides on its own writing. Perhaps more than any writer, Roth supplies the terms of his own evaluation (Henry James did as well but confined the effort to his prefaces). The novels are stuffed with critical discourse that analyzes characters and texts within the book we are reading. A novelist who dies is eulogized with a review of his best-known novel; an autobiographer (Roth himself, in *The Facts*) is subjected to scathing dissection of his memoirs by one of his characters; writers receive detailed critiques of their lives and work from relatives and friends; Roth's own ambitions for a Nobel Prize are mentioned and mocked; fans offer glowing, trite encomiums. Alvin Pepler, having tracked down Zuckerman in a deli, thanks him “For everything. The humor. The compassion. The understanding of our deepest drives. For all you have reminded us about the human comedy” (*ZU* 192); enemies supply nasty diatribes; even a character's therapist writes him up in a case study. In “Creativity: The Narcissism of the Artist,” published in a psychoanalytic journal, Peter Tarnopol reads that he “acted out his anger in his relationships with women, reducing all women to masturbatory sexual objects” (*MLM* 242).¹⁸ In effect, Roth has been conducting a career long preemptive strike, telling his readers before they form their own opinions or hear it from the critics that he (or Zuckerman or Tarnopol or Kepesh) is, among other things, overly clever, self-absorbed, emotionally vacant, compulsively manipulative, and, of course, a disaster with women.

Because many of his characters are hyperself-conscious, hyperarticulate, and given to harangues and monologues, readers complain that Roth is too busy explaining himself, is more an expounding essayist than a self-effacing novelist. And there is a measure of justice in these charges. Faced with the avalanche of assessment and interpretation Roth creates, a critic is tempted to imagine that everything that might be said has already been said. One needs to step back and see that his very desire to control the terms of discussion is also what Roth is exposing as futile, a desperate bid for armored insulation. In Roth's work control and mastery are simultaneously being enacted and unraveling; impulse and counterimpulse are at war, a crucial source of his work's pathos and of thematic and formal tension. The considerable achievement of *The Facts* is to distill this tension into thirty pages of "merciless self-evisceration," as we will see at the close of this chapter.

In this study I take seriously Roth's sense of his oeuvre as one vast text with each book to be read within and against the larger whole. My analyses focus on particular texts (I offer sustained readings of several) while being alert to the weave of internal connections generated by Roth's interlocking novels. To appreciate this dimension of Roth—the collocation whose rich inwardness has deepened over time as the oeuvre grows—one needs to hear how works, early and late, sometimes seemingly disparate ones, comment on each other prospectively and retrospectively. By my ear, the late nineties novels don't group together as the publisher (probably with Roth's blessings) says they do. That is, I set *Sabbath's Theater* into conversation with *The Human Stain* even though the latter text is the last volume of the so-called "American trilogy," of which *Sabbath* is not part. And unlike many, I do not regard the first volume of that trilogy, *American Pastoral*, as the summit of his career. As chapter 3 argues, the novel's rigorously immanent stance creates remarkable realist power but also militates against the imaginative audacity that marks Roth's finest work.

Instead of proceeding exhaustively, a task bound to be laborious given the size of the oeuvre, I will work in the free spirit of appropriation described above by Henry James. For this practice encourages what Adorno, in describing how best to read Hegel, calls "relaxation of consciousness." Since "letting go" is a prime Rothian imperative, such relaxation seems

apt. As an approach to a text, relaxation in effect makes a virtue of not knowing one's place. It means

not warding off associations but opening the understanding to them. Hegel can be read only associatively. At every point one must try to admit as many possibilities for what is meant, as many connections to something else, as may arise. A major part of the work of the productive imagination consists in this. At least a portion of the energy without which one can no more read than one can [read] without relaxation is used to shake off the automatic discipline that is required for pure concentration on the object and that thereby easily misses the object. (Adorno, *Hegel* 141–42)

Adorno describes a guiding ideal to be sought, if not achieved, in reading a novelist whose relentless world-making resounds with the play of echo and overlap.

Making connections is always a finite and selective process. Although a number of linkages will be made, others will not; pertinent but familiar ones—Kafka, Céline, Lenny Bruce for example—will be passed over in the interest of making fresher ones. The second half of this chapter will offer a reading whose bookends are Roth's two major forays into historical reinvention, *The Plot Against America* (2004) and the Anne Frank section of *The Ghost Writer* (1979), the astringent de-idealizations of the earlier work challenging the idealizations of the latter. Other juxtapositions will generate additional tension, for the relatively affirmative and sunny quality of this recent novel attracts into its orbit a number of darker countertexts that collide with it in mutual illumination.

The Plot Against America is a nightmarish historical fantasia of the United States veering into fascism in 1940. It acquires much of its power from being a thought experiment grounded in fact: what might have happened had the late thirties currents of nativist anti-Semitism embodied in Henry Ford, Father Coughlin, and others surged into a tidal wave lifting Charles Lindbergh, American hero, isolationist, and Nazi-sympathizer, into the White House. The possibility was not entirely remote; at a 1942 America First Committee rally in Madison

Square Garden a crowd of twenty-five thousand erupted into cries of “Our next president!” when Lindbergh appeared to address them. *The Plot Against America* has Lindy running as a staunch isolationist on the Republican ticket, easily beating FDR in 1940 and ushering in an ominous eclipse of democracy in a United States now ruled by an anti-Semitic white supremacist. He envisions America as a fortress of “national unity,” a stronghold—founded on what the actual Lindbergh called “our most priceless possession,” “our inheritance of European blood”—against “dilution by foreign races” (14). Although pogroms erupt throughout the nation, fascism does not take root here; the plot against America fails. The novel’s events are refracted through the bewildered, frightened eyes of none other than seven-year-old Philip Roth, who recounts as an adult those days of “perpetual fear” when he was a third grader in Newark and his family was turned upside down, caught in the very eye of the gathering fascist storm. His parents, Herman and Bessie, last seen lovingly memorialized by their son in two nonfiction volumes (though nonfiction is always a relative term with Roth), *The Facts* and *Patrimony*, are here reborn as the novel’s major protagonists, both near-heroic in their resistance to Lindbergh and in their frantic efforts to keep family and community intact.

Even this summary will suggest to longtime readers of Roth’s fiction that *The Plot Against America* includes a dimension as startling as its historical fantasia—the tender evocation of the strength of parental love and family loyalty. Until now, these themes have been rare, perhaps unprecedented, in his fiction, as if in devising the plot against America, he was also plotting against—trying to resolve—a defining preoccupation of his oeuvre: “the eternal problem of attachment.” This is the mocking phrase of the aging rake David Kepesh in *The Dying Animal* (105). His acidic monologue would seem to be the polar opposite of *The Plot Against America*, as it depicts the Rothian isolato (to borrow Melville’s term) in extremis, a man who “took a hammer to domestic life and those who stand watch over it,” and who has dedicated his life to “imposing as few constraints on [his] independence as possible” (112). He is a man condemned by his own son as terminally immature—“you’ve never been serious for a day in your life” (89). A cultivated libertine, a PBS culture critic and occasional professor,

Kepesh has found in the sexual act a “purity” of “revenge,” however fleeting, against life’s frustrations and defeats. But as he improbably finds himself obsessed in his sixties with one of his young ex-student lovers, this purity grows increasingly elusive and Kepesh begins to doubt that even his image of “pure fucking”—between dogs—is all that pure. Even among dogs there are “in canine form, these crazy distortions of longing, doting, possessiveness, even love,” all elements that Kepesh uneasily labels “the extraneous.” If sex is revenge against life and “also the revenge on death,” it is, as well, Kepesh implies, revenge against love, that maximally messy threat to self-sovereignty. With despair and awe at love’s persistence, Kepesh calls it “this need. This derangement. Will it never stop?” (105–6).

Roth protagonists have been grappling with forms of that question since the spectatorial aesthete and bachelor graduate student Gabe Wallach ended *Letting Go* (1962) pondering the “larger hook” he was on. By the end of his complaint, Portnoy has thrown in the towel and gone to the dogs: “Maybe the wisest solution for me is to live on all fours! . . . and leave the rightings of wrongs and the fathering of families to the upright creatures!” (305). The monastic, aging Zuckerman of the second trilogy over which he presides—*American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, and *The Human Stain*—has pretty well solved the “the eternal problem of attachment”—not least because he is a self-described “helpless eunuch” after prostate surgery. He is a far cry from the manic satyr of his first trilogy (*The Ghost Writer*, *Zuckerman Unbound*, and *The Anatomy Lesson*), where women abounded. But Zuckerman tended to reduce them to pliable and temporary help-mates, as he was preoccupied by a physical and emotional ordeal triggered in part by his guilt and rage over his scandalous literary success. The aging Zuckerman grows attached to those who help him spin out narrative—Murray his old English teacher (*I Married a Communist*) and the memory of his friend Coleman Silk. Only Coleman’s doomed affair with Faunia and the long-running adulterous union of Sabbath and Drenka, replete with its own intricately arranged infidelities, could be said creatively to address, if not resolve, the problem of attachment. In sum, until *The Plot Against America* an essay titled “Attachment in the Novels of Philip Roth” would make for very quick reading indeed.

Yet his current breakthrough is hedged—it depends not on the realist rendering of adult relations but on the freedom of a fable involving a magical return to childhood. More specifically, it requires an ominous fantasy of isolationism to unfreeze the balked impulse to connect, just as it takes the shock of his lover’s perhaps imminent death to thaw Kepesh and lead him to the brink of repudiating his aversion to commitment.

Though far from a major work, *The Plot Against America* is arguably Roth’s most emotionally reconciled novel and offers an opportunity to step back and survey the tumultuous Rothian world whence it comes. To assist us in learning the ground rules, I will enlist the help of the younger David Kepesh, as Roth portrayed him in *The Professor of Desire* (1977), when he was still questing after endless desire. The novel concludes at the summer cottage of Kepesh and his girlfriend Claire as they are hosting the visit of Kepesh’s widowed father. He has brought along a new friend, a fellow widower, Mr. Barbatnik, a Holocaust survivor. After he tells his harrowing tale of survival, Kepesh asks him what he wanted to be before the war started:

Probably because of the strength of his arms and the size of his hands I expect to hear him say a carpenter or mason. In America he drove a taxi for over twenty years. “A human being,” Barbatnik answers, “someone that could see and understand how we lived, and what was real, and not to flatter myself with lies. This was always my ambition from when I was a small child. In the beginning I was like everybody, a good cheder boy. But I personally, with my own hands, liberated myself from all that at sixteen years. My father could have killed me, but I absolutely did not want to be a fanatic. To believe in what doesn’t exist, no, that wasn’t for me.” (257)

Instead, Mr. Barbatnik adamantly insists on thinking for himself. His “ambition” to be a “human being” is at once simple and momentous; it acquires resonance in Roth’s deft counterpoint: to Barbatnik’s calm detachment he juxtaposes Kepesh’s compulsive pursuit of the phantom of realized desire, a quest that greedily devours present contentment. Just as soon as he starts cherishing the haven he has created with his lover, Kepesh wonders “how much longer before I’ve had a bellyful

of wholesome innocence.” “Only an interim. Never to know anything durable” are the phrases haunting him as the apt epitaph of his life (251).

Refusing all fanaticism, Mr. Barbatnik’s lucidity coincides with Kant’s Enlightenment imperative—“have the courage to use your *own* understanding!” Such sober rationalism is of course hardly the keynote of Philip Roth’s fiction and makes Barbatnik a rare figure in a fictive world populated with compulsives and transgressors embracing excess of every stripe. Roth’s work draws energy, wit, and outrage from his assault upon maturity and self-control; we have noted his effort to be “frivolous” and to subvert his “considerable investment in seriousness.” But rather than repudiating maturity and seriousness, Roth redefines them, reflecting his stake in reinvention as the basis both of art and of selfhood. This is a commitment to unsettlement that includes keeping open the status of human being as an ambition to be achieved.

“We are writing fictitious versions of our lives *all* the time” (*RMO* 161). Authors write novels in ways analogous to how we compose ourselves, creating “counterlives” and “counterconfessionals” that, like a boxer’s counterpunching, are modes of survival in a world where we are never immune from being “blindsided by the terrifyingly provisional nature of everything.” This line from *The Human Stain* (336) sums up the raw force of risk and chance ceaselessly proliferating, the “real” about which Mr. Barbatnik is so lucid. In Roth’s universe the real is not an entity, but instead is what frustrates our control; and characters and readers, like the author, must be skeptical of all that purports to be solid and serene. They are asked to engage in supple negotiation of the hazardous, the unfinished and flowing, a letting go of mastery the better to honor history’s recalcitrance—the animating condition of Roth’s turbulent, plastic world. The imperative of flexibility responds to a demand not for conventional seriousness but for being “game,” a key word in *The Human Stain*.

Amid life’s and art’s messy makings and unmakings, fanaticism purifies experience, arrests it in structures and identities of stubborn rigidity and inertia. The resulting purification (what Roth will come to call “pastoral”) deadens, as Zuckerman explains at the end of *I Married A Communist*, “because everything that lives is in movement. Because

purity is petrification. Because purity is a lie” (318). The ironic twist in Roth’s vision, the turn of the screw that increases tension and pathos, is that the very antidote to fanaticism—the supple self-reliance implicit in Mr. Barbatnik’s liberating insistence on thinking for oneself—easily freezes into another form of fanaticism, that of malignant autonomy (Kepesh of *The Dying Animal*, for instance). This is the pure product of a society whose root ideology renders the illusion of self-sovereignty as natural as the air we breathe.

The Human Stain depicts a man trapped in the antinomy of radical individualism; he seizes it as his birthright, but his defiant willfulness blinds him to limits, to the simple fact that “history claims everybody, whether they know it or not and whether they like it or not” (“The Story” 12). Roth made this remark in a recent essay about *The Plot Against America*, but it derives from a passage in *The Human Stain* that sums up the unraveling of Coleman Silk’s “life as a created self.” The history the novel describes is the 1990s era of political correctness, a national “purity binge” that culminates in the outbreak of sanctimony surrounding the Clinton/Lewinsky sex scandal; the censorious atmosphere indirectly triggers Silk’s downfall and eventual remaking.

The Plot Against America stages the eruption of an earlier, more sinister “purity binge,” a national contagion of fanaticism. The novel makes the political doctrine of isolationism the corollary of human selfishness and indifference. The analogy between political and personal isolation is evident when Philip asks his father what Lindbergh’s campaign mantra, “an independent destiny for America,” means. “It means turning our back on our friends. It means making friends with their enemies. You know what it means, son? It means destroying everything that America stands for” (84). What gives pathos to the last sentence of Mr. Roth’s answer and saves it from being merely a patriotic bromide is that the action of the novel explodes his poignant assumption that America possesses an immutable single unity of meaning and purpose. The iron loyalty Herman Roth expects and embodies within his family and the sense of decency and democratic fair play that he takes to define America will be violated not only by external political events but by violent conflict within his own family. His younger son, Philip, watches him “fall apart” and eventually recover, but with his optimism

and energy now tempered. Yet in seeing his father “powerless to stop the unforeseen”—the advent of Lindbergh and the fear that swamps Newark—Philip comes to grasp that history is an ambush, and that this is an inadmissible truth in a country dedicated to mastery. “The unfolding of the unforeseen was everything. Turned wrong way around, the relentless unforeseen was what we schoolchildren studied as ‘History,’ harmless history. . . . The terror of the unforeseen is what the science of history hides, turning a disaster into an epic” (114).

Tossed in the tidal wave of history, Philip eventually loses his “juvenile purity.” In Roth’s world the loss of purity is a fortunate fall from illusion; in Lindbergh’s America purity is foundational. Indeed, his policy of isolation, like his racism, depends on erecting inviolable borders to keep out the alien. But these fanaticisms are only the most obvious ones; less visible because naturalized as quintessentially American is the purism of rugged individualism. Lindbergh of course is one of the actual mythic icons of that creed—the “adored Lone Eagle, boyish and unspoiled . . . the legendary American man’s man who gets the impossible done by relying solely on himself” (29–30). Here, it might be said, Coleman Silk meets his paragon, as did Ronald Reagan. The Reaganesque spell Lindbergh’s presence casts resides in his power to evacuate history and exist in a mythic yesteryear, creating a national fantasy that Roth, here as elsewhere, links to a pastoral purity. In a brilliant stroke, he makes the enforcement of pastoral a government project designed to secure Lindbergh’s vision of “an independent destiny for America.” Because this independence requires not only impermeable borders facing out but the pastoralizing of American Jews within, Roth brings into being a new federal agency, the “Office of American Absorption,” that inaugurates the “Just Folks” volunteer work program. Its announced purpose is to “implement programs ‘encouraging America’s religious and national minorities to become further incorporated into the larger society’” (84–85). Sacrificial assimilation is the prime mechanism of control in this garrison state.

The novel traces the destructive workings of isolationism on an individual level, a condition Roth conceives as one of stunted responsibility and which he will also link to the asocial ethos of what Lindbergh lauds

as “entrepreneurial individualism.” The image of this stunted absence of humanity is the stump, what cousin Alvin’s leg is reduced to by a war wound (determined to fight Hitler, Alvin has enlisted in the Canadian army). Having once been the “family’s conscience” in his refusal to abide Lindbergh’s abandonment of European Jews, Alvin returns home an embittered remnant, indifferent to the war on fascism: “Alvin didn’t care one bit. No longer was he burdened by concern for anyone’s suffering other than his own” (158).

Careful to avoid turning his novel into a neatly dichotomized morality play, Roth makes his stunted specimens of humanity as various as America; they come in different ethnicities and modalities and include the metaphorical and the literal. Besides Alvin, there is “Little Robert, the living stump,” a legless man who begs outside Mr. Roth’s insurance office and chimes out ball scores in his “deep, declamatory voice” (128). He haunts young Philip, especially after he sees his father and Robert exchange greetings, saying each other’s name. Witnessing this brief moment of intersubjectivity enlarges Philip’s understanding of what counts as human. Mr. Roth’s easygoing greeting of the legless Robert epitomizes for Philip his father’s capacity for an openness and adhesiveness rare in a world populated by isolationists of all sorts, from the Lindberghs to the “exalted egoism of . . . conspicuously dynamic Jews” like Uncle Monty. This cutthroat fruit man—one of the “brutal entrepreneurial *machers*” strictly “in business for themselves”—feels no compunction about firing his brother Herman for taking off from work to help rescue a neighbor (123).

Herman and Bess Roth are markedly different temperaments, indefatigable in their concern for others in the face of widening catastrophe. They form the novel’s moral center. Its ethical core is relayed to Philip in an epiphany as he watches his mother finally break down in tears: “there was nothing for me to do except watch until the weeping had drained her to the dregs, whereupon my whole idea of her underwent a startling change: my mother was a fellow creature. I was shocked by the revelation, and too young to comprehend that there was the strongest attachment of all” (340). Attachment simply by virtue of being a fellow creature—not an American, not a Jew, not a Gentile—is set forth as a

universalism that acts as a moral counterweight to an aggressively nationalist American political culture deformed by isolationism both in foreign policy and in the greedy self-absorption of capitalist acquisitiveness.

Not only is seven-year-old Philip “too young to comprehend” the claims of a “fellow creature” (as opposed to someone called mother or father or cousin), he attempts to rid himself of all obligations. His desired form of stump-hood is to become an orphan. Twice Philip resolves to leave home. Unlike his brother Sandy, who as a publicist for the Just Folks program is “riding the crest of history,” Philip seeks near-oblivion: “I wanted nothing to do with history. I wanted to be a boy on the smallest scale possible. I wanted to be an orphan” (233). Later he says he wants “to start out fresh as a boy nobody knew” (346). These Huck Finn impulses of a seven-year-old to vanish and reinvent himself outside history—to recover, somehow, “a child’s peacetime illusion of an eternal, unhounded now”—partake of the national fantasy of pastoral regression back into the “womb-dream of life in the beautiful state of innocent prehistory” (*C* 323). But each time Philip is thwarted in his effort to exit history and attachment.

Responsibility comes to him in the shape of hapless Seldon Wishnow, Philip’s nerdy, needy schoolmate and shadowy secret sharer who lives downstairs from him with his dying father and harried mother. After many plot twists, Seldon, now an orphan, winds up in the twin bed next to Philip, just where the one-legged Alvin had slept. Seldon is nursed back to strength with Philip’s devoted help. But now, as he says in the novel’s final words, “there was no stump for me to care for this time. The boy himself was the stump, and until he was taken to live with his mother’s married sister in Brooklyn ten months later, I was the prosthesis.” Here yet another living stump, but one outside the family circle, bids for Philip’s human fellowship, and this time he accepts. The intimacy between human stump and human prosthesis becomes the redemptive image of attachment amid a world of loss, a world most of whose members seem to have signed the contract of mutual indifference. Philip is indeed his parents’ son.

All this benign stagecraft is, to put it mildly, quite atypical of Roth. He is after all the writer about whom John Leonard said with only some

understatement that he finds it “preposterous and maybe even evil that anyone should try to be, pretend to be, remember having been, or believe in the marginal possibility of one day being happy” (9). Even while *The Plot Against America* is not a happy book, it does exude a certain mellowness of reconciliation. He has written a fable and hence is less obligated to the demands of realism and of his own propensity for outrage. And also typical of a fable, the book fails to build narrative momentum (in part because in its last quarter it resorts, newsreel fashion, to summaries of national events as the crisis plays itself out) and its characters tend to remain static, as if dwarfed by the imaginative daring of Roth’s rewriting of history.

“Maybe now that I’m nearing death, I also long secretly not to be free,” remarks David Kepesh late in *The Dying Animal* (106). Perhaps this provides a clue as to what impelled his creator to surmount a nightmare of isolation by reasserting the claims of attachment. One rendering of this nightmare is *The Plot Against America* of course, but another is *The Dying Animal*. Near the novel’s end, Kepesh, having sculpted his life with the conviction that “he who forms a tie *is* lost,” faces the nagging persistence of what he would like to dismiss as “these crazy distortions of longing, dotting, possessiveness, even of love” (106). Soon after, he is blindsided by the sudden reappearance in his life of his former lover, who is herself still reeling from a recent diagnosis that she may be mortally ill. When she eventually calls from the hospital asking to see him, Kepesh feels compelled to go. He breaks off a conversation with the unidentified person to whom he has delivered his monologue. But just as Kepesh is about to depart, his interlocutor at last speaks:

“Don’t.”

What?

“Don’t go.”

But I must. Someone has to be with her.

“She’ll find someone.”

She’s in terror. I’m going.

“Think about it. Think. Because if you go, you’re finished.” (156)

“Finished” ends the novel; left open is whether Kepesh will heed these words and stay put. Or will Kepesh, who, like Coleman Silk in *The*

Human Stain, years ago “took a hammer to domestic life,” at this late hour take a hammer to the life of Teflon bachelorhood he has so meticulously fashioned for himself? (112). The trap that ensnares Kepesh is the same one facing Coleman Silk, the trap of mastery: “there is the drive to master things, and the thing that is mastered is oneself” (*HS* 273). This is Roth’s version of the “dialectic of Enlightenment.” Imprisonment in one’s means of survival lurks within “the drama that underlies America’s story”—the upping and leaving to “become a new being.” Roth’s alertness to the paradox that complicates this “story” forms the basis of what might be called the plot against radical American individualism in his late work, an ideology whose undoing he locates within its very constitution. One reason *The Human Stain* is one of Roth’s most venturesome books (along with *Sabbath’s Theater*) is that Coleman Silk manages, late in life, to smash his way at least partially out of the trap, to rewrite the plot; with the help of his “game” companion Faunia he takes a hammer to his masterful selfhood. We can only guess if Kepesh will perform a similar rewrite—that is, turn “you’re finished” from meaning “doomed” to meaning something like “completed” or fulfilled in solidarity with a fellow creature. Such a turn would fulfill Rilke’s famous imperative, “You must change your life,” which are the words Kepesh quotes to conclude his first incarnation, in *The Breast* (1972). That this possibility of change survives the bleakness of *The Dying Animal* testifies to Roth’s gift for eluding any refuge of purism, be it sentimentality or despair, the better to nurture his respect for what in *The Plot Against America* bruises and strengthens his seven-year-old imagined self—the force of the “unforeseen.”¹⁹

The Plot Against America is not Roth’s first rewriting of history. More audacious, and riskier to his audience’s sensitivities, is the section in *The Ghost Writer* where Nathan reinvents Anne Frank as a postwar Holocaust survivor in America. She shares with young Philip the orphan fantasy to “start out fresh” as someone “nobody knew.” Anne gives herself the “sweet name” of Amy Bellette and becomes a comely, “self-intoxicated” but gifted writer at little Athena College in the Berkshires, where she is the adoring student and would-be lover of a venerable Jewish American author E. I. Lonoff.

In this earlier work of 1979, the rewriting of history moves in a direction opposite *The Plot Against America*—not as homage to parents but as revenge against them. In *The Ghost Writer* the orphan fantasy is not simply of a new start but of violent severance from origin as the spur of creative liberation. This circulates in the imagination of two ambitious young writers—both Amy and another Lonoff adorer, the earnest twenty-three-year-old Nathan Zuckerman. On a visit to the fastidious master’s home, Nathan meets and becomes smitten with Amy, soon wrapping her in his impious reinvention. In conjuring up a new Amy, he expresses what his idealizations repress—his own need to be at odds with all authority figures, including the one he worships, Lonoff. For Nathan’s Anne, becoming Amy means that Anne must keep the secret of her survival from her beloved father, who is the family’s sole known survivor and who has arranged for her diary to be published. And becoming Amy allows Anne to become a spectator of her ascent to historical and literary immortality via the *Diary*’s international success: “It is too late to be alive now. I am a saint,” she tells Lonoff (150).

Some readers of *The Ghost Writer* have been offended by Roth’s irreverent use of Anne Frank (A. Cooper 185). Offense of course is Roth’s aim, a way to push against the limits of “good taste” without apology and enact what his protagonist also insists upon—a “refusal to justify” himself to his elders (GW 110).²⁰ The propulsive rage that feeds creativity is what Amy Bellette/Anne Frank and their creator Nathan come to discover. Reflecting on her “responsibility . . . to the dead,” Amy realizes that

an ax was what she really wanted, not print. On the stairwell at the end of her corridor in the dormitory there was a large ax with an enormous red handle, to be used in case of fire. But what about in case of hatred—what about murderous rage? She . . . never found the nerve to take it down from the wall. Besides, once she had it in her hands, whose head would she split open? Whom could she kill in Stockbridge to avenge the ashes and the skulls? If she even could wield it. No, what she had been given to wield was *Het Achterhuis, van Anne Frank* [the original Dutch title—*The House Behind*—of her diary]. And to draw blood with it she would have to vanish again into another achterhuis, this time fatherless and all on her own. (147)

This is the logic by which she justifies keeping her secret, and it affirms her “seething passion to ‘come back’ as the avenging ghost” honoring the dead (148). “‘For them,’ she cried, ‘for them,’ meaning all who had met the fate that she had been spared and was now pretending to” (147). But she soon realizes that her sense of the nobility of her obligation is only the idealized public face that hides what really thirsts for vengeance—this “half-flayed thing” that is herself: “I felt flayed. I felt as though the skin had been peeled away from half my body” (152). She continues: “it wasn’t corpses I was avenging—it was the motherless, fatherless, sisterless, venge-filled, hate-filled, shame-filled, half-flayed, seething thing. It was myself” (153). Here we glimpse the brutally stunted stump of self that is Anne Frank as survivor, a self too hideous to appear in public, a “my” that must become an Amy. So Anne becomes Amy Bellette, the “sweet name” that, she says, hides “from hatred”—of others and of herself.

Amy is the “avenging ghost” not simply of those who perished but of her own dead Anne Frank self. Her quest for vengeance is also a quest for “Christian” tears, pity, and love (“to be loved mercilessly and endlessly, just the way I’d been debased”), but this need is as insatiable as the hunger for revenge: “I will always be this half-flayed thing. I will never be young. I will never be kind or at peace or in love, and I will hate them all my life” (153). Her effort to seduce Lonoff is rooted less in love than the desire to (at least as his wife sees it) “bewitch him, to break through the scrupulosity and the wisdom and the virtue into his imagination, and there, as Anne Frank, to become E.I. Lonoff’s *femme fatale*” (155). But Amy’s effort is also more daring and critical—to stain the purity of Lonoff’s small, perfected art, to become in effect his counterself—flayed and furious—embodying everything that is not “fussiness” and “fastidiousness,” everything that might escape his “relentless winnowing out of the babyish, preening, insatiable self” (74, 56). Here are the lineaments of Nathan/Roth’s own artistic creed.

The Ghost Writer’s excursion into historical fantasy, the reinvention of Anne Frank, is pointedly unsettling, for at its heart is a self reduced to a suffering “thing”—a stump of rage. But whereas the human stumps of *The Plot Against America* are usually images of sterile, selfish autonomy, this “half-flayed thing” that survives as Amy Bellette is a figure of creative

power, making her diary into an ax of vengeance. To borrow the words of Richard Wright's exhilarated response to reading the satirical shafts of Mencken, Anne/Amy is "slashing with [her] pen, consumed with hate"; she uses "words as a weapon, using them as one would use a club" (237). "And to draw blood" with her ax of a book—to maximize the shock of its integrity and gravity—it must be a work of posthumous witness; so she will turn the ax against her past and disappear into Amy and America, remaining "fatherless and all on her own" (147).

Shorn of even epidermal protection, a raw wound of anger, self-orphaned Anne is a figure of artistic autonomy in extremis. Hers is an autonomy the opposite of sterile; stripped of defenses, she is responsive to everything around her. She is both an avenging ghost and a ghost writer—her diary a permeable medium or open channel for other voices to pass through and leave their imprints. And Anne/Amy is also a medium through which Zuckerman expresses his own rage, channeling it at least twice. The "cruelty" that the anguished Anne practices on Otto Frank, "her perfect father, now sixty," echoes the seduction Amy practices on the staid Lonoff; he becomes her "Dad-da" and she his "little girl" urging him to abandon his wife. This echoes the cruelty that Nathan practices on his own perfect father (133, 118–19). The conjunction of rage and creativity reaffirms what Roth has always understood—art's capacity for thriving on anger and wounds: "a writer needs his poisons" (*RMO* 139).

The most powerful writing in *The Facts* (1988) dwells precisely on the anger that can propel art. Late in the book, Roth disturbs the carefully manicured pastoral rendering of his life story as an adored and adoring Jewish son. He brings on Nathan Zuckerman to launch a "countertext" to peel away the bland surface of this "nice-guy" memoir and to expose himself to a "really merciless self-evisceration" (*F* 172, 170, 185). As if still identifying with the Anne Frank he had returned to life nearly a decade earlier, Roth submits, in effect, to his own flaying. He has Nathan tear apart the self-exculpating representation Roth has styled of his relations with Josie, his first wife. As if still identifying with Lonoff, the immaculate purist, Roth stages his own encounter with an avenging ghost. For Josie was his femme fatale, a woman of "insanely destructive possessiveness" whom Roth met while he was in graduate

school, married in 1959, and separated from in 1963 (171). Nathan homes in on Roth's protective self-portrayal as Josie's "victim," a stance that allows him to see himself as innocent of anger until his fateful meeting with the femme fatale (and alcoholic) who embodies "everything the Jewish haven was not" (174). Only in 1968, with her death in a car accident, did years of strife and steep alimony end. "I felt absolutely nothing about her dying at thirty-nine other than immeasurable relief," Roth states (153).

"Where's the anger?" Nathan asks his creator. "I doubt that Josie would have come into your life at all had the anger not been there already. I could be wrong, but you've got to prove it, to convince me that early on you didn't find something insipid about the Jewish experience as you knew it, insipid about the middle class as you experienced it, insipid about marriage and domesticity, insipid even about love" (171). Opening up all that Roth has been carefully hiding—his "dark, or unruly, or untamed side" as he describes it here, and elsewhere as his "anarchic and unsocialized" impulses—Nathan strips Roth of the mask of innocence (*F* 169; *RMO* 66). Not only did you not turn away from Josie, Zuckerman tells him, but after an "initial flirtation" you pursued her, "*needing* that battle, that attack, that kick, *needing* that *wound*, your source of invigorating anger, the energizer for the defiance . . . Because the things that wear you down are the things that nurture you and your talent" (174).

But Nathan is just warming up. "Everything you are today you owe to an alcoholic shiksa. Tell them *that* next time you're at Yeshiva. You won't get out alive" (178). Just kidding? Well yes . . . and no. Nathan's zinger prefaces an earnest request: "I think you must give Josie her real name . . . because she comes so close, in an elemental way, to being a peer. . . . Josie is the real antagonist, the true counterself, and shouldn't be relegated like the other women to a kind of allegorical role. She's as real as you are . . . and nobody else in this book is" (179). Seeking justice, or at least subjectivity, for Josie, Nathan implores Roth: "honor with her name . . . the psychopath through whose agency you achieved the freedom from being a pleasing, analytic, lovingly manipulative good boy who would never have been much of a writer" (180). And Nathan specifies how she liberated Roth. All the other women in your

life “call forth your maturity, challenge and coerce it, and you deliver, you meet that challenge easily. With Josie, however, you regress, shamelessly and dangerously. She undoes you where ordinarily you do up everyone else . . . and when you’ve done them up you leave them. But she undoes you and undoes you and undoes you. . . . Josie is the heroine you were looking for” (180).

Freedom from being the good boy, freedom to discover and sublimate in art the anarchic and unsocialized parts of the self—all this requires an undoing of “maturity,” a wounding of the responsible adult self that risks leaving one a “half-flayed thing” (*GW* 153). This process of letting go or undoing defenses defines Roth’s creative economy, and Nathan demands respect for its prime catalyst. Josie the counterself and doomed fatal woman performs, like Amy Bellette, the inestimably valuable service of violating “the scrupulosity and the wisdom and the virtue.” Roth witnessed firsthand a compelling act of maturity undergoing a creative undoing in his friendship with the painter Philip Guston in the 1970s. As chapter 7 discusses, Guston was in the throes of a creative about-face, unwilling any longer to “mask the fear of revealing oneself” and unflinching in exposing what he called “badness” and “rawness” (qtd. Mayer 170).

The perversities of Roth’s creative economy are unique to the novelist but the desire to open up censored, renounced impulses sparks the antinomian energies of American literature beginning with the canonical nineteenth-century authors. In their extremity of imagination and radical skepticism they were the inaugural modernists, as D. H. Lawrence was perhaps the first to recognize. So the American grain in which I set Roth turns out already to be bursting its bonds, turning toward international modernism and vice versa, an expansiveness that the novelist’s own cosmopolitanism insists upon. If one had to articulate the broadly held aesthetic convictions among American and European and Eastern European modernists, one would do well to borrow the words of Roth from four decades ago. In one of the very few programmatic statements he has made about the power of literature, he wrote that it frees us “from the circumscriptions that society places upon feeling,” allowing “both the writer and the reader to respond to experience in ways not

always available in day-to-day conduct; or, if they are available, they are not possible, or manageable, or legal, or advisable. . . . Ceasing for a while to be upright citizens, we drop into another layer of consciousness. And this expansion of moral consciousness, this exploration of moral fantasy, is of considerable value to a man and to society” (*RMO* 195). Immaturity, among other things, is a vehicle for the aesthetic exploration of moral fantasy. The next chapter’s cross-cultural genealogy will chart some of the ways in which authors, responding to different political and social pressures and to literary precedent, find in immaturity a way to outwit the stifling prohibitions of upright civic and ethical virtue.