

The Theatre of the Self
Art and Selfhood in
Philip Roth's Zuckerman Novels

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“With respect to all forms of text-oriented literary criticism and theory that have been developed so far, it can be said that in the course of a literary essay, terms generally prove to undergo numerous shifts of meaning, and critics prove to entertain specific postulates about the reading process, to use reasoning by analogy, and to group phenomena in distinct categories in arbitrary ways. Hardly any questions are ever being asked about the meaning of the terms employed or about the conditions in which they could be applied to the research object without ambiguity.”*

Hugo Verdaasdonk

“I believe that literary criticism has about it neither rigour nor proof. Where it is honest, it is passionate, private experience seeking to persuade.”

George Steiner

“Literary criticism is often very inneresting.”

Delmore Schwartz

* “In alle vormen van tekstgerichte literatuurbeschouwing die tot dusverre zijn ontwikkeld blijken termen in de loop van een literatuurbeschouwelijk betoog tal van betekenisverschuivingen te ondergaan, specifiek postulaten over het leesproces te worden gehuldigd, analogie-redeneringen te worden toegepast, en verschijnselen op arbitraire wijze in onderscheiden klassen te worden ingedeeld. Vragen over de betekenis van de gebruikte termen en over de voorwaarden waaronder zij eenduidig met het object van onderzoek verbonden kunnen worden blijven vrijwel achterwege.” The English translation is mine.

This is an essay about those of Philip Roth's books that are known as the Zuckerman novels: *The Ghost Writer* (1979), *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981), *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983)—together collected as *Zuckerman Bound* (1985)—and *The Counterlife* (1986).¹ These are called the Zuckerman novels because they all deal with Roth's fictional alter ego, the novelist Nathan Zuckerman. Through this character, Roth explores general issues like the relation of art to life and the question of identity in a concrete way by giving an account of Zuckerman's struggle to devote his life to his art. In this account, Roth stresses the interdependency of the two issues of selfhood and art, which will hence determine the focus of my paper. I intend to provide a discussion of the argument of these novels rather than, for instance, a stylistic or narratological analysis. The identity crisis of Nathan Zuckerman—as a writer, a son, a Jew, a lover, an alleged anti-Semite, a doctor, a pornographer king, and so forth—will be a first focus. The relation of his fiction to his personal reality, or the role of his art in his life, will be a second. As a synthesis, I will eventually end with a discussion of how the novels can be said to make a statement about the role of fictionalization in the constitution of the self in general, as evidenced in the case of Zuckerman in particular.

In the first part of my essay, I will discuss how the young Zuckerman's art leads him into trouble in *The Ghost Writer*. A consideration of the young novelist's quarrel with his father over a short story, and of his relations with his girlfriend and with an admired older author, will show that the questions of life and art, of selfhood and artisthood, are far from separate issues. A fair amount of space will be taken up by this discussion of *The Ghost Writer*, because although it is the shortest, it is also the most concentrated of all the Zuckerman novels, and already contains most of the terms in which the argument of the subsequent novels will be cast.

After having next briefly considered the importance to the Zuckerman novels of the theme of reading and writing, the second half of the essay will then be devoted to one particular motif that best captures Zuckerman's combined crisis in both his personal and his professional life. This is the motif of play-acting and theatricality. It is as a conflict between authenticity and counterfeit, between sincerity and play-acting, that the conflicts between reality and fiction, between truth and (novelistic) lies, between life and art, are most effectively dramatized

1. All quotations from works of Roth will be accompanied by parenthetical title and page references. I have quoted from the following editions of the novels: *The Ghost Writer*, *Zuckerman Unbound*, and *The Anatomy Lesson* all from the one-volume *Zuckerman Bound* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989); *The Counterlife* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988). In addition, I will refer to Roth's collection of essays, *Reading Myself and Others* (2nd, expanded edition, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985 [1975]), and to his autobiographical book *Patrimony* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991).

and summed up in the novels. As though composing a series of musical variations on a theme, Roth has kept juggling the terms of all these antitheses, with the notion of play-acting as a constant ground note. Tracing this motif from *The Ghost Writer* through *Zuckerman Unbound* and *The Anatomy Lesson* up to *The Counterlife*, therefore, provides an excellent way into the novels' thematic argument.

As I see it, this argument moves from an initial *seeming* condemnation of play-acting in *The Ghost Writer* to a manifest celebration of it in *The Counterlife*. From an apparent stress on the insincerities or ambiguities of theatrical performance, the novels move towards an affirmation of the values of play-acting as paradigmatic of creative fictionalization, of the meaning-generating, world-constructing abilities of the human imagination. It is in *The Counterlife* that this resolution to the problems outlined in the earlier novels is elaborated most extensively. It involves, moreover, certain views on Jewish identity, indeed, on the very nature of the notion of identity and on the production of meaning, that are very intimately connected to the notion of a "theatrical existence," and that I will therefore also briefly try to outline at the end of my essay.

For a consideration of the related themes of fiction and identity, it is best to start with the first novel in the Zuckerman series, *The Ghost Writer*. This novel is an almost Jamesian tale about a young Jewish writer, Nathan Zuckerman, on a visit to an admired older author, E.I. Lonoff. Zuckerman hopes that Lonoff will somehow confirm him in his decision to uncompromisingly put all his energy at the service of his artistic calling—contrary to the wishes of his father, who demands an artistic compromise from his son over a short story that he thinks should not be published. Zuckerman is in search for an alternative paternal validation from Lonoff, who is to provide him with a more confident sense of selfhood both as an individual and as an artist.

To get a sense of how intimately the two themes of literature and selfhood are intertwined in this novel, it is necessary to take a close look at Nathan's quarrel with his father. As much as his admiration for Lonoff's work, it is this quarrel, which has greatly upset Nathan, that occasions his visit to Lonoff's lonely farmhouse. Like the novel itself, this conflict seems initially only to have a literary import: Victor Zuckerman is angry over his son's latest, as yet unpublished short story "Higher Education." But the quarrel soon takes on a more personal tone on the one hand, while on the other suggesting broader implications that exceed the boundaries of the merely local and the merely familial. It has significance on various levels. In one sense, for instance, it is "autobiographical"—that is to say, it is a dramatization of Roth's own quarrel, not with his father but with certain parts of the Jewish community in America, over his debut, *Goodbye, Columbus*

(1959). But although the autobiographical dimension is certainly more than merely incidental, it is not what I want to consider here. The three dimensions of the quarrel that do concern me might be termed the aesthetic, the moral, and the personal or emotional.

To begin with the aesthetic dimension is to begin with the quarrel's most general, almost "universal" level of significance. Being a conflict over a work of art, the quarrel takes on a certain classic stature—it becomes part of an age-old debate over the nature of mimesis, and the supposed immorality of fiction. There is a steady stream of objections to art dating back as far as Plato's distrust of tragic poetry and Moses' ban on images. The terms of the debate have inevitably shifted somewhat in the course of the centuries, but, crudely simplified, it can be said that artists are traditionally indicted on two counts. Firstly, their representation of reality can be considered too truthful, too painfully honest: things are being said that should have been left unspoken. Secondly, and contrarily, art can be accused of being radically *dishonest*, distorted, perversely one-sided: the artist is concealing the truth, hiding reality behind the veil of his artifice. In both cases, the quarrel is over mimesis; and although the two criticisms seem diametrically opposed, they are yet commonly *combined* in attacks on works of art accused of being distortive exactly because they are too keenly perceptive of reality.

This paradoxical *combination* is also at the heart of Victor Zuckerman's reproaches to his son. Nathan's excessive honesty seems to be at stake from the very beginning of the quarrel, when his father begins by saying "[w]ell, Nathan, ... you certainly didn't leave anything out, did you?" (*The Ghost Writer* 62). But the terms immediately shift. When Nathan defends himself by saying "[t]hings had to be left out—it's only fifty pages," his father answers: "I mean you didn't leave anything disgusting out" (*The Ghost Writer* 62). Nathan has not just been too honest, then, he has also been *selectively* perceptive, focusing too exclusively on the sordid details of the family feud described in his story. That his father's objections are to Nathan's mind rather confused becomes clearer in their exchange about cousin Sidney, who figures as a major character in Nathan's story. His father says that Nathan is entirely mistaken about the "heroic" aspects of his cousin:

"Sidney," he said furiously, "never threw any redneck off any ship! Sidney threw the bull, Nathan! Sidney was a petty hoodlum who cared about nobody and nothing in this world but the good of Sidney!"

"And who actually existed, Dad—and no better than I depict him!"

"Better? He was worse! How rotten he was you don't *begin* to know. I could tell you stories about that bastard that would make your hair stand on end."

"Then were *are* we? If he was *worse*—Oh, look, we're not getting anywhere."
(*The Ghost Writer* 67-68)

As a literary critic, of course, Nathan's father has little authority, and the

reader is hardly swayed, I should think, by his arguments on this score. Inasmuch as the quarrel enacts the old conflict between artists and society, he “stands for” society. And although we are part of society ourselves, in our capacity as sympathetic readers we yet tend to side with the artists. On the whole, we tend not to hold them responsible for all the reactions their work may provoke—Lonoff, for instance, is not responsible for the anti-Semitic mail he receives, just as Salman Rushdie is not really to blame for the calumniations heaped on his head. It seems to me, in any case, that it makes little sense to want to read and enjoy fiction if one does not hold that the artist has certain liberties of representation precisely at points where other people are fettered by the constraints of everyday morality.

But besides observing that Zuckerman senior does not seem to have a good insight in the nature of fiction, we may go further and pinpoint more exactly the faults of the “poetics” he implicitly seems to propagate. This seems to be a poetics of escapism. Nathan never explicitly uses this word, but insofar as he deigns to defend himself against his father’s accusations, this is the line he takes. The stories his father would like to see him write would be false and distortive—would be, in short, escapist fictions, in which Jews are only portrayed in a positive, inoffensive light. The father’s tactics against the threat of anti-Semitism are thus rather primitive, consisting of the replacement of one kind of escapist “fiction”—anti-Semitism—by another—a false depiction of an idealized Jewish community.

That this is Nathan’s line of defence appears only implicitly, as in the remark quoted above, that his cousin Sidney “actually existed, Dad—and no better than I depict him!” He clinches the point more neatly, if more obliquely, when he talks to his mother over the phone from the Quahsay writer’s colony to which he has fled to avoid further confrontations with his father. His mother calls to implore him to contact his father, but when in the course of their talk she has occasion to refer to the holocaust and to the possibility of violence threatening Jews, he flies off the handle, and shouts: “Ma, you want to see the physical violence done to the Jews of Newark, go to the office of the plastic surgeon where the girls get their noses fixed. That’s where the Jewish blood flows in Essex County, that’s where the blow is delivered—with a mallet! To their bones—and to their pride!” (*The Ghost Writer* 77). Although at first sight this seems to have nothing to do with literary art, yet Nathan accuses “the girls” of a similar escapism that his father falls prey to. Here, too, “aesthetics”—in this case plastic surgery—are undesirably mixed in with questionable social or “political” motives. All too often, Nathan suggests, “a prettier nose” actually amounts to “a less obviously Jewish nose.”²

2. I do not know whether this kind of plastic surgery actually was an integral feature of the assimilation of the fifties (although of course American teenagers in general have a reputation for going to the plastic surgeon as to a hairdresser). But Nathan’s remark does tally with similar teasing jokes made by the protagonist of Roth’s own “Goodbye, Columbus” to his girlfriend. The suggestion is not

The same desire to keep a low profile towards the Gentiles is evident in Victor Zuckerman's remarks about "Higher Education." Only by crushing reality's bones, however, can such pleasant fictions be entertained. The father's tastes suggest what might be called a poetics of unreality.

If the father's aesthetic judgements are not calculated to win our hearts, he fares still worse where his *moral* authority is concerned. It is not that Victor does not pose valid questions, particularly with regard to Nathan's authority to write about Jews, or the Zuckerman family. This is a legitimate question, and it will recur again and again in the Zuckerman books, even up until *The Counterlife*, where Zuckerman's brother Henry complains about "*his* version, *his* interpretation, *his* picture refuting and impugning everyone else's and *swarming* over *everything!* And where was his authority? *Where?*" (*The Counterlife* 235). But although it is legitimate to raise the issue of authority, few readers will want to agree with the father's hasty settling of it. What is particularly disagreeable is the way Nathan's father runs "to *his* moral mentor" (7), judge Wapter, a prominent figure in the Jewish community. At that point the father loses, for both Nathan and the reader, his own authority.³ The Wapters send Nathan a presumptuous letter, advising him strongly to consider his responsibilities as a son both of his father and of the Jewish community, and they attach ten preposterous "QUESTIONS FOR NATHAN ZUCKERMAN," culminating in the outrageous tenth question: "Can you honestly say that there is anything in your short story that would not warm the heart of a Julius Streicher or a Joseph Goebbels?" (*The Ghost Writer* 75). This missive definitively settles the question of which of the two parties in the quarrel we agree with—just as they settle the question for Nathan of whether he is going to heed his father's warnings. For where, after all, is *their* authority to compare Zuckerman to people like Streicher and Goebbels?

But when we come to the third dimension of the quarrel, where it is the *emotional* authority of the father's claim on Nathan that is concerned, matters become less clear-cut. Rightly so, of course, for Nathan would otherwise have had too easy a victory; after all, Roth is in all fairness obliged, as he himself admits, to

necessarily that the girls have a conscious intention not to be taken for Jews—their adherence to the reigning aesthetic ideals may simply entail an increased sensitivity to stereotypic images of what Jews are supposed to look like.

3. Victor Zuckerman's recourse to a "higher authority" echoes a passage in Roth's essay/story "Looking at Kafka": "If there is not one father standing in Kafka's way, there is another—and another behind him. Dora's father, writes Max Brod in his biography of Kafka, 'set off with [Kafka's] letter to consult the man he honored most, whose authority counted more than anything else for him, the "Gerer Rebbe." The rabbi read the letter, put it to one side, and said nothing more than the single syllable, "No"'" (*Reading Myself and Others* 309). This essay also foreshadows *The Ghost Writer* in another respect, namely in inventing a counterlife for Kafka in America much the way Zuckerman does for Anne Frank.

“give the other guy the best lines” when he uses his fiction to polemicize.⁴ Thus, Victor Zuckerman may not in the end receive our full-hearted agreement, but he does have a case. Or if he does not, at least what he says rings true, sounds authentic, his concern is sincere and deserves to be heard and responded to with seriousness. It is at the level where the contestants do not represent anything but themselves, the “literal” level of the directly personal, familial quarrel, that the father’s anger has its biggest impact on Nathan.

The father receives the reader’s sympathy partly because Nathan is shown to be unsure of himself. The moment his father takes him aside, Nathan knows what is coming, and asks himself: “Why hadn’t I waited to see if I could even get it published, and then shown him the story already in print? Or would that only have made it worse?” (*The Ghost Writer* 62). Secondly, the father does sound authoritative when, for instance, they discuss their cousin Sidney. He probably does know Sidney better than Nathan, and even if the latter’s portrayal of Sidney is not flawed in a strictly technical, artistic sense, it may still fail to do justice to “the real Sidney.” Finally, Nathan’s vulnerability is also underlined in another way: the discussion with his father over his story takes place during a walk in the same park his father used to take him to when he was a child. Not surprisingly, the quarrel thus becomes punctuated by nostalgic memories of childhood. Probably that is why he is so taciturn, unwilling to enter the discussion: these are obviously not some ordinary literary critic’s objections he has to deal with; it is a far more important, more personal matter. Nathan consequently gets more upset than he would perhaps become about a strictly technical, literary question, and eager to get away from his father’s nagging. He hops onto the first bus that comes along, setting out as planned to the Quahsay writer’s colony, to devote himself to his craft. It is exactly the emotional turmoil that the quarrel has thrown him in that finally leads to Zuckerman’s extravagant fantasies in chapters three and four of *The Ghost Writer*, where he outrageously hypothesizes an American post-war life for Anne Frank, and even goes so far as to envisage her possible marriage to himself to strengthen his credentials as a Jewish writer, to counter his father and judge Wapter’s accusations of betrayal.

Nathan’s eagerness to get on the bus without having satisfactorily discussed matters, however, results in an inevitable and irreversible hardening of positions. The reason why Nathan is so affected is that he is faced with the dilemma of self-definition. This becomes clear in the final exchange between the two, just before Nathan leaves for Quahsay. In a nutshell it gives the central subject of all the Zuckerman novels, the identity problem that ensues from the choice Nathan has to

4. In an interview with *The London Sunday Times*, the interviewer remarks, *à propos* of *The Anatomy Lesson*, that the literary critic Milton Appel in that book comes out of the argument with Zuckerman “rather well—better than Zuckerman, in fact.” Roth replies: “Of course you give the other guy the best lines. Otherwise it’s a mug’s game” (*Reading Myself and Others* 131).

make. “This story isn’t us, and what is worse, it isn’t even *you*,” his father says, and he goes on:

“You are a loving boy. I watched you like a hawk all day. I’ve watched you all your life. You are a good and kind and considerate young man. You are not somebody who writes this kind of story and then pretends it’s the truth.”

“But I *did* write it.” The light changed, the New York bus started toward us across the intersection—and he threw his arms onto my shoulders. Making me all the more belligerent. “I *am* the kind of person who writes this kind of story!”

“You’re not,” he pleaded, shaking me just a little.

(*The Ghost Writer* 69)

His father shakes Nathan in more than only a physical sense, of course. Maybe he shakes him only a little, but in crucial matters the least instability cause collapse. And this matter *is* crucial because at issue is, quite fundamentally, what Nathan *is*. This is not simply a question of finding out a pre-existent “hidden essence”: far harder, it is about a conscious choice, about what Nathan decides to *become*. The final “I *am*” is partly impulsive, spurred by his father’s—as he feels it—pushiness. But the choice Nathan faces is real. Deciding to go on with publication, deciding, simply, to become a novelist who will listen to the demands of his Muse first, and to the imprecations of his family only in the second place—this decision will entail a redefinition of self that is to prove far from unproblematic. It is this question that will dominate all the Zuckerman novels to come—the question of how Zuckerman is to define himself and his position in society, as well as *vis à vis* his family and the Jewish community at large.

One more thing that can be traced back to his father’s impassioned plea is the yearning for seriousness that is the driving force of much of the trilogy: “Look, Nathan, let me have my say. ... If you were going to turn out to be nobody, I wouldn’t be taking this seriously. But I do take you seriously—and you have to take yourself seriously, and what you are doing” (*The Ghost Writer* 66). But Zuckerman and seriousness, thereby hangs a trilogy. We will see him struggling to reconcile the demands of high seriousness on the one hand and the high fun of his humorous books on the other throughout the next novels. In *Zuckerman Unbound* he is called a “sucker for seriousness.”⁵ But he is a sucker

5. In the first chapter, Zuckerman is accosted on the street by Alvin Pepler, a would-be writer who wants to engage him in a discussion about agents and editors. Pepler says: “That’s why I asked you about an agent, an editor—somebody fresh who wouldn’t be prejudiced right off. Who would understand that this is *serious*.” And the text goes on: “Zuckerman, sucker though he was for seriousness, was still not going to be drawn into a discussion about agents and editors. If ever there was a reason for an American writer to seek asylum in Red China, it would be to put ten thousand miles between himself and those discussions” (*Zuckerman Unbound* 149).

for it in the way Tantalus was for his apple: it is always just out of his reach. Nevertheless, his father's insistence on seriousness is branded in his memory.

It is the emotional urgency of his father's appeal, then, that is a major cause for Nathan's conscious search for a selfhood in keeping with his calling. But the preceding discussion also suggests, I think, how inextricably the two themes of Nathan's selfhood and of the nature and responsibilities of art are intertwined. Although Nathan does not really respond to his father's specifically literary objections to his story, he will have to answer them satisfactorily if he is to justify his future career. And this need is made especially urgent because it is exactly from his chosen profession, from the sacred demands of artisthood, that he intends to derive a new identity to pit against the demands made on him as a son. It is for this that, in search of an authority to match his father's "moral mentor," he ends up in the Lonoff household, prostrate at "the high altar of art" (*The Ghost Writer* 3).

Nathan would fain, like a true modernist—a "Nathan Dedalus," as the title of chapter two has it—be able to renounce friends, father and family to dedicate himself wholly to his sacred task. But this proves to be more difficult for him than Joyce earlier in the century described it to be for that other Dedalus. Uprootedness, however traumatic, also was a cause of joy to modernism. It cannot be so for Nathan, however. As I have already suggested, he is too much tied to his father and family to easily soar away from them. This is perhaps most evident in the passages of nostalgic remembrance of childhood days spent happily in the same park where Nathan is now having his quarrel with his father. It is not that he wants to remain in "the park that used to be our paradise" (*The Ghost Writer* 69)—on the contrary, he is anxious to get to his mountain resort, the quasi-Olympus of Quahsay colony, as soon as possible. But he is aware of what he is giving up. For Stephen Dedalus, history was simply a nightmare from which he wanted to escape; for him, as for Joyce, exile was a consciously desired necessity. For Nathan, the escape from his personal, familial history is only the necessary, and regrettable, corollary of his dedication to art; for him exile is a painful imposition. Hence the forcefully elegiac quality of the entire trilogy.

To rationalize and validate his choice, Nathan visits Lonoff. But Quahsay Colony proves not to be a modern Olympus, as Paris is promised to become for Stephen Dedalus at the end of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. If judge Wapter does not receive the reader's sympathy, E.I. Lonoff's literary priestliness is partially discredited in the course of the novel as well. More than that, doubts are cast on the validity of Nathan's conviction that art should have an absolute priority in his life. This does not mean that his father is right, but only that Nathan is partially wrong himself, not so much in the cause he defends (his freedom to

write stories) as in the line of defence he takes. As the chapter title “Nathan Dedalus” and various other references to modernists and proto-modernists like Joyce, Mann, Flaubert and James indicate, he is full of a modernist artistic high-mindedness, the solemnity of which Roth takes some trouble to ridicule. Thorough demythologizers as the modernists were, they still kept one final piety in reverence: the religion of art. Roth, for his part, does not shy from mocking the seriousness of literature as well. In making high-mindedness Zuckerman’s eternal banana peel, he is actually good-heartedly mocking the solemnities of literary modernism. In fact, the older Zuckerman who writes down the account of his younger self’s visit to Lonoff is himself aware that his earlier high-mindedness has proved his stumbling block: “it wasn’t just that I wanted to convince Lonoff of my pure and incorruptible spirit—my problem was that I wanted to believe it myself” (*The Ghost Writer* 22).

One notion derived from modernist lore (although it dates back to Romanticism, if not further) is that of the artist’s sacrifice of his personal life on the altar of art, and his consequent estrangement from “life” as lived by “ordinary people.” This idea of authors’ bookishness versus other people’s real experience is also reflected in Victor Zuckerman’s words, when he accuses Nathan of a lack of experience: “from a lifetime of experience I happen to know what ordinary people will think when they read something like this story. And you don’t. You can’t. You have been sheltered from it all your life” (*The Ghost Writer* 66). The artist’s unworldliness is, like the mimesis debate, a traditional theme. In some way an artist’s life is supposed to be at odds with his art—the two stand in a tensed relation, if not downright opposition. This finds expression in such scenarios as that of the Faust myth—an artist’s life is “eaten away” by his art. Applying the crazy arithmetic of Balzac’s *peau de chagrin*, each work of genius shortens one’s life by a fixed number of years; the greater the genius, the shorter and more miserable the life—Mozart and van Gogh would be the prime examples.

The myth is pre-eminently applied to, and also very popular amongst, romantic decadents, who allegedly scale the furthest extremes of experience and pay for it by an early death. Another, quite distinct variant, the Flaubertian whine, has grown equally compelling to certain authors. It tells of inexpressible, torturous toil that goes largely unappreciated and produces little more than frustration and, well, just a few masterpieces into the bargain, but at the expense of lived life—so much so, in fact that it may cause the artist to sigh, about an ordinary happy family’s children he has seen playing in the garden, that at least “*ils sont dans le vrai*.”⁶ This conception of the artist as workaholic may be less heroic, but the

6. The anecdote is mentioned in *Zuckerman Unbound* (226); Thomas Mann also recounts it in his preface to the American translation of Kafka’s *The Castle*—this may well be the place where Roth has it from. Mann says it was Kafka’s favourite anecdote, which casts an interesting new light on Roth’s use of it.

sacrifice is, of course, nothing the smaller for that. The Flaubertian whine is clearly echoed in the Lonovian groan. It causes Nathan to exclaim about Lonoff: “a man, his destiny, and his work—all one. What a terrible triumph!” (*The Ghost Writer* 53). The rigour of this solution appeals to Nathan; it would seem to liberate him from the need to answer any more annoying questions from family and friends, from *le vrai*.

That Roth, however, is not going to treat these traditional views on the conflict between life and art *entirely* seriously is signalled right at the very start of *The Ghost Writer*. In Yeats’ poem “The Choice”, the problem is clearly outlined:

The intellect of man is forced to choose
Perfection of the life, or of the work,
And if he take the second must refuse
A heavenly mansion, raging in the dark.
When all that story’s finished, what’s the news?
In luck or out the toil has left its mark:
That old perplexity and empty purse,
Or the day’s vanity, the night’s remorse.⁷

An ironic allusion to this choice at the start of *The Ghost Writer* mocks these stereotypes. When Lonoff “proceeds to undo Nathan further by asking him to hear something about his life,” we are told how Nathan made the same choice Yeats would doubtless have made. But the circumstances are rather different: selling subscriptions door-to-door, he is warned by his overseer, “Mammon’s Moses” McElroy,

not to fool with the housewives we found alone at home in their curlers. ... “Either get laid,” he coldly advised us, “or sell *Silver Screen*. Take your pick.” ... Since no housewife ever indicated a desire to invite me into the hallway to so much as rest my feet—and I was vigilantly on the lookout for lasciviousness flaring up in any woman of any age who seemed even half willing to listen to me from behind her screen door—I of necessity *chose perfection in the work rather than the life*, and by the end of each long day of canvassing had ten to twenty dollars in commissions to my credit and an unblemished future still before me.

(*The Ghost Writer* 6-7; my emphasis)

This sets the tone for Zuckerman’s further comic blunderings. Unlike modernist artist-heroes, Zuckerman is not presented in *The Ghost Writer* as a righteous defender of sacred art, but rather as an uncertain, over-eager young man stumblingly making his first steps on the path of art. And his father is quite right: he *is* inexperienced, and this does lead him into trouble.

In *The Ghost Writer* there is one episode which highlights particularly well

7. Quoted in Cynthia Ozick, “The Riddle of the Ordinary,” *Art and Ardor* (New York: Dutton, 1983) 203-4.

the way in which his excessive faith in art as the highest value may lead him into trouble. This is the account of the break-up of his relationship with Betsy, the ballet dancer. Betsy is an artist as well; indeed, her art is everything to her, “a point of view no less beguiling to me than the large painted gypsy-girl eyes and the small unpainted she-monkey face, and those elegant, charming tableaux she could achieve, even when engaged in something so aesthetically unpromising as, half asleep in the middle of the night, taking a lonely pee in my bathroom” (*The Ghost Writer* 24-25). Her devotion to her art thus establishes her as a foil to Lonoff, another instance of the enslaved artist whose life is “a cross, as she described it, between the life of a boxer and the life of a nun” (*The Ghost Writer* 26).

What is particularly revealing in Nathan’s account, however, is Betsy’s supposed aestheticizing of even such trivial everyday events as “taking a lonely pee in my bathroom.” Of course, the aesthetics of this resides entirely in the eye of the beholder rather than in the girl’s conscious intention. It is Nathan, not Betsy, who aestheticizes things; this telltale description is an indication that he has the precise relation of life to art somewhat out of focus. He perceives Betsy not so much as a human being but as a piece of art. He displays this tendency earlier in the novel, too, when he catches his first glimpse of Amy Bellette: “Where had I seen that severe dark beauty before? Where but in a portrait by Velázquez? ... that face, whose strong bones looked to me to have been worked into alignment by a less guileless sculptor than nature ...” (*The Ghost Writer* 12-3). In his youthful enthusiasm, Nathan wants to translate the entire world into art, but this makes him sometimes pay too little attention to reality. If his father risks propagating escapism, Nathan crushes some of reality’s bones himself, too. After all, after first seeing Amy, he goes on to fantasize elaborately about her position in the Lonoff household, and supposing her Lonoff’s daughter, dreams of marrying her. Then, when he knows she is one of his ex-students rather than his daughter, he thinks of her as Anne Frank miraculously escaped from the camps and hopes to marry her in *that* guise. None of his versions have much to do with reality. And as for his affair with Betsy—when we learn how it stranded because of Nathan’s (seemingly compulsive) adultery, he does not come across as America’s most adult young lover either.

That the break-up was in yet another way related to “the art of fiction” becomes clear when Nathan talks of the mistake of having confessed his adulterous adventures to Betsy: “Bold honesty, of course, produced far more terrible results than if I had only confessed to seducing the wily seductress and left it at that; nobody had asked me about anybody else. But carried away by the idea that if I were a perfidious brute, I at least would be a truthful perfidious brute, I was crueler than was either necessary or intended” (*The Ghost Writer* 27). A few pages further on still, Nathan’s dilemma simply becomes a parody on the debate about truth versus fiction:

The hatred for me I had inspired [in Betsy] by telling the whole truth had me particularly confused. If only I had lied, I thought—if only I had said that the friend who had intimated I might not be trustworthy [a colleague of Betsy’s to whom Nathan has made love] was a troublemaking bitch, jealous of Betsy’s success and not a little crazy, none of this would be happening. But then, if I had lied to her, I would have *lied* to her. Except that what I would have said about the friend would in essence have been true! I didn’t get it.

(*The Ghost Writer* 31)

Nathan’s perplexity betrays his naivety both as a lover and—insofar as it is a bewilderment at the nature of fiction—as a young writer.⁸ Sometimes he is too rigidly honest, and thus unintentionally cruel (the way his father feels him to be in “Higher Education”). At other times he is too easily swayed by the persuasive power of fiction, too naive a reader—as ludicrously appears when he is almost moved to tears by the sentimentality of the account he himself gives the Lonoffs of the affair, telling “only the charming part”:

I portrayed [Betsy] in such uxorious detail that, along with the unnerving sense that I might be laying it on a little thick for this old married couple, I wound up in wonder at the idiot I had been to relinquish her love. Describing all her sterling qualities, I had, in fact, brought myself nearly to the point of grief, as though instead of wailing with pain and telling me to leave and never come back, the unhappy dancer had died in my arms on our wedding day.

(*The Ghost Writer* 27)

Clearly, Nathan does not fully grasp the subtlest complexities of fiction and storytelling yet.

In this way Roth proceeds to compromise (but at the same time to underline the importance of) the writer’s craft by showing how it is related to its everyday equivalent, the lie. And Roth being the domestic writer he is, the lies frequently involve adulterous affairs. Starting from the commonplace that fiction is “all lies,” and therefore to be disapproved of, he literalizes the idea and looks into the complex relations between fiction writing in the novelist’s study and in the marital bedroom—between stories in books, and lies in everyday life. The subject of fidelity in marital life thus functions as a running commentary on the theme of the nature of fiction and fiction-writing.

What Nathan can be blamed for specifically is a particular brand of escapism. Refusing to be too partial to Nathan in the conflict over his story, Roth has him commit the same “sin” his father showed signs of. In his purported flight

8. Although for clarity’s sake I want to stress the “narrative” aspects of this episode here, of course it is also a fact that there is no nice way to tell a dirty story. Ultimately, Nathan’s cruelty does not reside in his confession so much as in the act of *committing* adultery.

from reality into art, Nathan risks being blind to the reality of his responsibilities. This, I think, is the significance of the account of the affair with Betsy. Art will provide a way of life, but it cannot provide the total salvation Nathan undoubtedly hopes for—there *is* no total escape from *le vrai*.⁹ There are limits to a man's possibilities for change.

Lonoff seems to be aware of this. He certainly does not give in to the unreality of his daydream of a life in Italy with Amy Bellette as his young and adoring lover. Yet the story of his marital life stands in useful counterpoint to the glimpses we get of Zuckerman's love life. During the dinner conversation in chapter one, for instance, Hope's final outburst of anger sparks Nathan's memory of Betsy's similar rage. The better to compromise the sanctum of art, Roth has taken care to embroil Lonoff in an equally messy marital predicament. To be sure, judgement of it can never be conclusive. The portraits of Hope Lonoff and her husband are so finely, so subtly drawn that it remains undecidable to the end whether Hope is just a hysteric, driven to frenzy by an unjustified jealousy (unjustified because although Lonoff is in love with Amy, he does not act on it), or whether she is hounded and suppressed, raising her voice to no avail. This ambiguity is similar to the later depiction of Nathan's quarrel with his brother Henry in *Zuckerman Unbound* and *The Counterlife*: there too, as I will argue below, it never becomes quite clear how many of the accusations levelled at Nathan by his brother are justified, and how many are rooted only in fraternal envy.

Henry's case is of further relevance, moreover, because although Henry's reproaches to his brother are naturally different from Hope's to her husband, they do have something in common. This mainly concerns the assumption of authority by the two writers. Henry's charge is that Nathan, in using the family as material for his fiction, has pretended to an authority he does not possess. The same can be said—*is* said, in effect, by Hope to Lonoff. The Lonoffs' marital quarrels seem to centre around ways of narrating. This is brought out most clearly when Hope tries to tell the "story" of Amy Bellette. Lonoff corrects her in a trivial detail, and she gets upset: "I think I can talk about this without help. I'm only relating the facts,

9. In this respect Roth's own views are rather different in tone from Zuckerman's frantic dilemmas. Alain Fienkelkraut asked him in an interview, "Do you share the ideal of the writer as hermit, a self-ordained monk who must remain secluded from life for the sake of art?" and Roth's answer is entirely characteristic: "Art is life too, you know. Solitude is life, meditation is life, pretending is life, supposition is life, contemplation is life, language is life. Is there less life in turning sentences around than in manufacturing automobiles? Is there less life in reading *To the Lighthouse* than in milking a cow or throwing a hand grenade? The isolation of a literary vocation—the isolation that involves far more than sitting alone in a room for most of one's waking existence—has as much to do with life as accumulating sensations, or multinational corporations, out in the great hurly-burly" ("Interview with *Le Nouvel Observateur*" in *Reading Myself and Others*, 128).

and calmly enough, I had thought. Because the story was in a magazine, and not in an anthology, doesn't mean that I have lost control of myself. Furthermore, Amy is not the subject, not by any means" (*The Ghost Writer* 30). And she goes on to define the subject of her story as being Lonoff himself. Lonoff seems to find that Hope exactly *cannot* "talk about this without his help." She breaks out in a rage and shouts "[t]ell her to accept that job, tell her to stay! She should!" (*The Ghost Writer* 32). The double meaning of the word "tell" hints at what is really at stake: the relation of narration to authority. Lonoff continually corrects his wife, in a way that sometimes sounds tyrannous.

When Hope says that "[b]ecause you happen to be a writer doesn't mean you have to deny yourself the ordinary human pleasure of being praised and applauded," Lonoff replies: "Ordinary pleasures have nothing to do with it. Ordinary human pleasures be damned. The young man wants to be an artist" (*The Ghost Writer* 29). What Hope represents is exactly the voice of the "ordinary human pleasures" that E.I. Lonoff has meticulously purged from his life, the voice he has stifled, and is stifling still. As a tyrannical narrator, he not only refuses to console his wife with a more pleasing fiction about himself and his marriage, but in doing so effectively condemns her to silence, not tolerating the existence of any rival fictions to compete with his own. His own view of his life and marriage is marked by an honesty that is the honesty, in the first place, of "true mimesis," of the conscientious artist—the same honesty that got Nathan in trouble with Betsy. It surfaces most bleakly, for instance, in sayings like "I long ago gave up illusions about myself and experience" (*The Ghost Writer* 24). Talking about Lonoff's work, Nathan speaks of its "celebrated blend of sympathy and pitilessness" (*The Ghost Writer* 10). This will stand as a description of Lonoff's attitude towards his marriage, too. Only, in that case it is rather less admirable.

As I said, this is only one possible interpretation of the Lonoffs' marriage, and therefore necessarily one-sided. But that Lonoff is not an easy man to live with, that he is stultified, inclined to pomposity and pedantry, seems undeniable. He does not only sacrifice himself on the altar of art, he also sacrifices his marriage on it, he makes the human sacrifice of Hope.¹⁰ In this way, his moral authority is questioned as much as judge Wapter's, making the rabbinical posture with which he seems to administer Nathan's "rites of confirmation" at the end of the novel both fitting *and* ironic.

In this way Nathan's alternative to his father's plea is subtly discredited. It is not that his desire to make a career as an artist is in itself illegitimate. But the

10. This is somewhat similar to Anne Frank's fictionalized sacrifice of her father for the sake of her fame in chapter three. Cf. Derek Rubin, "Philip Roth and Nathan Zuckerman: Offences of the imagination," (*Dutch Quarterly Review*, 13.i [1983]: 50): "What if, in reality, our having made a 'saint' of Anne Frank was, indeed, the cause of her having to relinquish her father?" I draw a slightly different moral from the dilemma, but the essential point remains the same, I think.

highway of art proves not to be without obstacles itself—obstacles, moreover, of a pre-eminently moral nature. The relation of art to morality is both more complex and more important than the youthful Nathan Zuckerman expects it to be. And what is more, literature does not provide him with a sense of selfhood as easily as he had hoped. Lonoff is not only a questionable moral role model where marriage is concerned—he also provides little comfort for the young author in search of a self. For after all, what use is a role model who, in the course of a quarrel with his wife, declares that “my ‘self’, as you like to call it, happens not to exist in the everyday sense of the word” (*The Ghost Writer* 30)?

Nathan’s visit to Lonoff, then, does not resolve his identity problem either. But what the preceding discussion has, I hope, suggested, is that his profession is to play a large role in his struggle to define who he is as an individual and as a writer. Art and life *are* indeed deeply connected, and not only in the sense that the label “artist” is to provide Nathan both with a livelihood and a sense of identity. What Nathan finally has to achieve is a more workable balance between the two poles that are symbolized by the unnecessary cruelty he practised on Betsy in what he told her, on the one hand, and the sentimental escapism of the account of their relationship he gives to the Lonoffs on the other. Reading and writing prove to be relevant to more than just books, and in more than just a metaphorical sense. The way in which Zuckerman fails to create a happy life for himself as he creates a bestseller is one of the things the Zuckerman novels are concerned with. As I will try to show further on, it is *through* fiction and writing that Zuckerman will become less and less certain about himself, just as it will eventually be by fiction and fiction writing that he will regain confidence. As Peter Tarnopol, the protagonist of Roth’s *My Life as a Man* (1974) and himself the author of two “autobiographical” short stories about another Nathan Zuckerman, puts it: “literature got me into this, and literature is gonna have to get me out.”¹¹

A relevant notion in this connection is the idea (a postmodern commonplace by now) that we “write” and “read” our lives, both in making them cohere in our recollections and in making decisions about our future actions. In both, “reading” and “writing” are not opposed but inextricably interwoven—we “rewrite” our memories in “reading” them, and we “read” our present predicaments to decide how to “write” our own futures. This idea is certainly relevant to Roth’s fiction. Before I go on to discuss further the problem of selfhood and how it is dramatized in the novels, therefore, it will be instructive briefly to consider various instances

11. The phrase seems to be a favourite of Roth’s. The title of a chapter in *My Life as a Man*, it is used to head a section of *The Philip Roth Reader* (1980) as well. The section contains, incidentally, the second chapter of *The Ghost Writer*, from which I will quote below.

of writing and reading as a theme in Roth's fiction.

How important even the unmetaphorical, mere physical acts of writing and reading can be becomes obvious early on in *The Ghost Writer*, as soon as Lonoff has retired to bed. Left alone in the admired author's study, Zuckerman first draws up a list of all the books he feels compelled to read only because Lonoff has read them ("halfway down the page I already seemed to have sentenced myself to a lifetime at hard labor"), and immediately starts off by twice reading Henry James' "The Middle Years," "as though preparing to be examined on it in the morning" (*The Ghost Writer* 56). Then also, we learn that "[o]n a clear sheet of paper I finally wrote down what [Lonoff had] said so as to see exactly what he'd meant. All he'd meant" (*The Ghost Writer* 57). This suggests that the meaning—the *full* meaning—is never apparent at first sight, that it requires writing and reading, recording and interpretation to bring it out. And it also hints at ways in which writing and reading are essentially similar, rather than opposed, as we usually think.

In both his essays and his novels, several instances can be found where Roth shows his awareness of the near-identity of reading and writing in a general sense. Usually, one can detect it in some kind of "double-barrelled" phrase, as for instance when he calls *The Castle* "Kafka's novel about the difficulties of getting through" (*Reading Myself and Others* x). This aptly expresses the double frustration of communication that is the subject of *The Castle*. On the one hand, its protagonist K. cannot get his message across, cannot "get through" to the Castle; and on the other hand, he is at a loss how to interpret the scant signals emitted by the Castle, is unable to "get through" to their real meaning. Both on the sending and the receiving end, communication is hampered.

A similar conflation of the two opposed acts of reading and writing, sending and receiving, uttering and interpreting is made in *The Ghost Writer* in connection with Lonoff. We learn that he has to underline key sentences of what he reads, even if it is the most trivial magazine article, so as to let it "get through" to him. "Of course, I have always read books with pen in hand," he says, "but now I find that if I don't, even while reading magazines, my attention is not on what's in front of me" (*The Ghost Writer* 17). Hence Zuckerman's later reference to Lonoff's "reading pen" (34), the pen Lonoff uses for underscoring. The phrase reads like a truthful paradox, if read not as "a pen used while reading to underscore key sentences" but as "a pen that reads," or "a pen used for reading." The phrase thus hints at the fact that actually each writing pen *is* a "reading pen"—that is to say, that each writer's writing is always also a reading, a rewriting of what has been written before.

The observation may seem trivial and irrelevant to its context, yet it proves actually to be quite crucial to *The Ghost Writer*. After all, Zuckerman's artistic calling is shown to be very much connected with his sense of a place in the tradition, with Henry James and Isaac Babel (and E.I. Lonoff) as main points of

orientation; and we also find quite a lot of actual rewriting in the novel itself. The clearest example is the rewriting of the biography and the diary of Anne Frank. The scandalous invention of an American “afterlife” for Anne is of course most salient, but in the process of re-imagining her life the diary is quite extensively retold as well. And in his retelling, Zuckerman interpretively stresses certain features that reveal his own preoccupations, such as Anne’s ambitions to become a writer, and her conflict with and letter to her father (which, reinforced by other references to Kafka, is also made into an implicit allusion to the famous *Brief and den Vater*). Also, on a different level, the retelling clearly reflects Roth’s interests and habits of mind. Thus, he characteristically pounces on the “doubling” of the sisters Margot and Anne, in terms of a strict, religious Jewishness versus a more worldly attitude—a dichotomy that is not by far as pronounced, if even present at all, in the actual *Diary*.

But *The Ghost Writer* suggests other ways than just intertextuality in which writing is at the same time a form of reading. A lot of reading also goes into self-criticism, in writing and rewriting drafts—typically, in the case of Lonoff, about twenty-seven of them. Lonoff loudly complains about this painstaking process, saying that all he ever does in life is “turn sentences around.” And this phrase, too, reinforces my point about the importance of interpretation in Roth’s work. For surely this is a reference to “the famous Talmudic saying, ‘Turn it and turn it again, for everything is in it.’”¹² This adds colour, of course, to the ironic portrayal of Lonoff as a rabbinical figure—the lofty countervoice of art is implicitly pitted against the religious admonishments of the Judaic tradition. But the allusion is more than an ironic jibe at the age-old tradition of biblical text commentary. Rather, it serves to “borrow” that tradition’s seriousness, to argue against the supposed frivolity of the artist’s desire to “get it right.” To the mere *pleasure* of reading and interpreting literature is now added the urgent seriousness of biblical exegesis.

Another instance where the affinity of literary and theological interpretation is suggested is in the conflict between Nathan and his father. “Higher Education” centres on a conflict of interpretation—the conflict, specifically, over two words, over “how exhaustive Meema Chaya had meant to be in her will with the ringing words ‘higher education’” (*The Ghost Writer* 60). Because this interpretive conflict has only pecuniary motives, rather than religious ones, it is quite a savage travesty of biblical exegesis; Victor Zuckerman is not aware of this, but *this*

12. Quoted in Norman Finkelstein, *The Ritual of New Creation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992) 46. The saying must indeed be famous, for Robert Alter also cites it: “‘Turn it over, and turn it over again, for everything is in it,’ according to Ben Bag-Bag’s famous formulation in the Mishnah Avot’ (*Necessary Angels: Tradition and Modernity in Kafka, Benjamin, and Scholem* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP; Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1991] 72). Even though Roth says he knows very little about Judaism, surely he will not be ignorant of this phrase.

parody is even a greater *chutzpa* than Nathan's showing the family at its worst. And this kind of interpretive uncertainty and conflict with respect to relatively simple phrases or phenomena is characteristic of all the novels in the trilogy. Just as the story "Higher Education" centres on the conflict over the interpretation of two words, *The Ghost Writer* itself in turn centres on the conflict over the fifteen thousand words of *that* story. In the next novel, *Zuckerman Unbound*, there is a similar interpretive problem with the father's dying breath—with which he possibly curses his eldest son. The father's dying word is given to us not as objective, descriptive fact, but—like almost everything in the Zuckerman novels—filtered through Zuckerman's consciousness and other characters' interpretations. He may have said "bastard"—indeed, this is the most likely reading—but it may also have been "faster," or "vaster," or "better," or "batter." Next, in *The Anatomy Lesson*, interpretation focuses on Zuckerman's excruciating and mysterious neck pain, *possibly* a result of his father's *possible* final curse. "They just kept coming, these diagnoses. Everybody had a slant. The illness with a thousand meanings. They would read the pain as his fifth book" (*The Anatomy Lesson* 354). But Zuckerman is by now so fed up with the whole doubt-ridden process of interpretation that he adamantly refuses to ascribe any meaning whatsoever to his ailment; throwing a volume of poetry across the room in the opening scene, he mentally exclaims: "Absolutely not! He refused to make of his collar, or of the affliction it was designed to assuage, a metaphor for anything grandiose" (*The Anatomy Lesson* 299).¹³

In all three novels, then, exegesis of single words or phenomena is in question—single facts eliciting multiple interpretations. It is in this that Roth's writing perhaps manifests itself most clearly as rooted in a Jewish tradition: in his fascination with, as Robert Alter calls it, "the notion of textuality as a vehicle of truth."¹⁴ The importance attached by Roth to interpretation is not, however, the

13. The refusal is stubbornly carried on by Roth outside the novel: "[Interviewer:] *But because the pain isn't diagnosed, because it's a mystery pain, we might tend to view it as symbolic pain, as pain visited upon him by the Appels, by the less than first-rate women, by the state of Zuckerman's career, and so on.*

"Symbolic pain? Could be for all I know. But in a real shoulder. What hurts is a real neck and shoulder. The trouble with pains is they don't feel symbolic, except maybe to critics.

"...
"Of course Zuckerman ends the book in an advanced state of metaphor, with his mouth wired shut by surgery.

"He breaks his jaw falling on a tombstone in a Jewish cemetery, after overdosing on painkillers and booze. What's so metaphorical about that? Happens all the time" ("Interview with *The London Sunday Times*," in *Reading Myself and Others*, 132, 133).

14. Robert Alter, *Necessary Angels*, xiii. For the connection between an interpretive bent and Jewishness, cf. also Harold Bloom: "You don't have to be Jewish to be a compulsive interpreter, but, of course, it helps." Bloom writes this after having suggested that for Kafka and Freud "finally their Jewishness consists in their intense obsession with interpretation, as such. All Jewish writing tends to be outrageously interpretive ..." (Preface, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, by Yosef Hayim

result of a deeply felt religious concern, as it is in the Judaic tradition. On the contrary, in Roth's work the principle of the primacy of interpretation is thoroughly secularized. More than that, it is conceived as a mode of life, rooted *in* life, and is applied to the world as much as to texts. The above-quoted example from *The Anatomy Lesson* illustrates this nicely: it is not only words that can be scrutinized and prodded with an interpretive stick, but real-world, actual physical phenomena like a pain as well. Zuckerman's *refusal* to read a meaning in his pain is, of course, a denial of the very possibility that "literature got him into this and literature is gonna have to get him out." But the point of the pain is exactly that it *can* indeed be read as Zuckerman's fifth book, although it can be "read" differently too. As I started out by saying, the point is that imaginative creation and interpretation are not just matters of the writer's study.

The importance of interpretation outside books probably applies most urgently to the self. Interpretation is, in fact, a dire necessity for the modern self—necessary if one is to know the world and to learn one's place in it. This is a result of the crisis of identity caused by the "death of God" and the resultant crisis of authority¹⁵—ironically so, because on the one hand the heavily interpretive Judaic tradition is partly responsible for Roth's interest in interpretation, while on the other hand interpretation is a need created by his very disaffection from that tradition and his revolt against its authority. But however that may be, it is the interconnectedness of Roth's interest in interpretation and the problem of the definition of the self that I want to stress here. This interconnectedness is implicitly hinted at in the following quotation from an interview with Roth by Hermione Lee for the *Paris Review*:

The Jewish quality of books like mine doesn't really reside in their subject matter. Talking about Jewishness hardly interests me at all. It's a kind of sensibility that makes, say, *The Anatomy Lesson* Jewish, if anything does; the nervousness, the excitability, the arguing, the dramatizing, the indignation, the obsessiveness, the touchiness, the play-acting—above all the *talking*. The talking and the shouting. Jews will go on, you know. It isn't what it's talking *about* that makes a book Jewish—

Yerushalmi [New York: Schocken, 1989] xxii-xxiii).

15. The absence of a God creates what in politics is called a "power vacuum": there is no longer a central authority from which the law can be derived. This is a central question in all of Roth's work; as he puts it himself in an interview about *The Great American Novel*: "From whom shall one receive the Commandments? The Patimkins? Lucy Nelson? Trick E. Dixon?" (*Reading Myself and Others* 84). And it is precisely this absence of an ultimate authority that creates the need for interpretation. If one can no longer decide on the right way to act by consulting the Law, one will have to start interpreting not just the text of the law, but other texts—and not only texts, but the world.

it's that the book won't shut up. The book won't leave you alone.
 Won't let up. Gets too close. "Listen, listen—that's only the half of it!"
(Reading Myself and Others 162-3)

The *reason* for the shouting and talking has to do, exactly, with the ever-present possibility of new interpretations. There is always talk because of an essential open-endedness, because issues can never be closed off. There is always something more, there is always another side, another half to tell. And this open-endedness is here directly related to the definition of the self, of course—more specifically, to the definition of a Jewish “kind of sensibility.” Roth’s concept of the self is closely bound up with this definition of Jewishness. As I will argue further on, Roth conceives of the self exactly as a troupe of multiple selves, all clamouring for attention, all crying out “listen, listen—that’s only the half of it!”

Central to this concept of the self is the notion of “play-acting” that Roth here mentions. The idea of play-acting and the theatricality of the self plays a major role in the Zuckerman novels, and it is this motif that I want to trace in the rest of this essay. The notion of theatricality is very important in the novels because it involves a conflict between authenticity and make-believe, between sincerity and play-acting, that is central to the trilogy’s themes. It is in this motif, in fact, that the two themes of the search for selfhood and the problems of artisthood converge: how does the “lie” of a theatrical performance relate to the “lies” of the novelist’s fictions? The motif refers to the theatrical aspects of everyday life in general, while at the same time containing an artistic dimension that makes it especially relevant to the novel’s explorations of the artist theme.

In the conflict between authenticity and play-acting, the negative value of the inauthentic is, quite expectably, frequently associated with all forms of play-acting, and this is exactly what will lead to Zuckerman’s identity crisis. This is already the case in *The Ghost Writer*, where the actual crisis is as yet only adumbrated, but where all the elements that will contribute to it are present. Before I go on to trace the motif of play-acting through the subsequent Zuckerman novels, therefore, a brief consideration of the motif’s role in this first novel is in order. It will give some idea of the arguments that are at stake in this issue.

Although play-acting is an important motif in all the Zuckerman novels, it may seem at first sight to be of limited relevance in *The Ghost Writer*, being restricted to such “local effects” as a stray reference to the actress wife of Felix Abravanel, the worldly, fashionable author who is the exact opposite of the reclusive Lonoff, or casual allusions like a reference to the snow outside Lonoff’s house falling as in “a silent-film studio” (*The Ghost Writer* 39). More central is the role played in the novel by the stage version of Anne Frank’s diary.¹⁶ Every reader will agree that the most astonishing aspect of the novel lies in Roth’s daring

16. The play is important also for allowing Roth to strengthen the “thematic architecture” of the entire trilogy: both in *Zuckerman Unbound* and *The Prague Orgy* there are further references to it.

to imagine scenes like the one in which the “real” Anne Frank is watching a Broadway performance of the play about her life—and thoroughly disliking the audience’s tears. There is a strong suggestion that even if Amy Bellette were only pretending to be Anne Frank, she might still be performing a sincerer act than the Broadway actress impersonating Anne on stage. But—to paraphrase E.I. Lonoff quoting Jimmy Durante—it seems that Broadway can’t do without her anymore, though *she* can do well do without Broadway.

But the relevance of the theatrical motif is not limited to these instances. Its more central importance emerges in connection with the opposition between E.I. Lonoff and his “double” and opposite, Felix Abravanel. Noticing only such literal references as the one to Abravanel’s ex-wife’s profession would gloss over the important elements of show in the description of himself, of whom “the overall impression was of somebody’s stand-in” (*The Ghost Writer* 43). Performance, outward show is clearly an important part of Abravanel’s make-up—there always hovers an aura of showbizz around him, with his actress wives and celebrity-reporter-mistress. It is what makes him so unapproachable to the young Nathan, despite his seeming approachability. It is also, therefore, what finally drives Nathan into the arms of Lonoff, seemingly inaccessible but actually welcoming.¹⁷

There is a clear opposition between Abravanel the showbizz man, his self hidden behind his “oceanic charm,” and Lonoff the sincere ascetic, incapable of dazzling deception, his self laid bare for all to see. The dominant picture of the latter is that of an enemy of histrionics, much in the same way as he is, as I argued above, an enemy to his wife’s giving her version of the story of their married life. He has at one point to concede Hope’s success in rendering an account of being married to Lonoff: “That is enough. Quite thorough, very accurate, and enough” (*The Ghost Writer* 124). But on the whole, as we have already seen, he does not approve of her “act”: “Hope, this is play-acting. And pure indulgence” (*The Ghost Writer* 123). What is more remarkable, however, is that he voices such disparagements not only to Hope, but also to her rival, Amy Bellette, in the scene overheard by Nathan, just after Lonoff has given his Durante imitations:

The floor creaked where her two feet had suddenly landed. So she *had* been on his lap! “Look!”

“Cover yourself.”

“My corpse.”

Scuffling on the floorboards. The heavy tread of Lonoff on the move.

17. The fact that Lonoff is really second choice is concealed, yet it is undeniably implied: “[S]ome three years earlier, after several hours in the presence of Felix Abravanel, I had been no less overcome. But if I did not fall at his feet straightaway, it was because [...] with Abravanel such boundless adoration [...] was doomed to go unrequited” (*The Ghost Writer*, 41). And he concludes his story about Abravanel thus: “All of this was why, from Quahsay, I had mailed my four published stories to Lonoff. Felix Abravanel was clearly not in the market for a twenty-three-year-old son” (*The Ghost Writer*, 48).

“Good night.”
 “Look at it.”
 “Melodrama, Amy. Cover up.”
 “You prefer tragedy?”
 “Don’t wallow. You’re not convincing. Decide not to lose hold—
 and then don’t.”

(*The Ghost Writer* 86)

If we would read a little perversely, we could almost say that Lonoff seems to judge Hope and Amy’s behaviour merely in aesthetic terms (“you’re not *convincing*”)—that their bad play-acting jars on his aesthetic sensibilities rather than on his sense of propriety or on his emotions. Such an observation is not entirely off the mark. Actually, what Lonoff does is not so much impugn the two women’s “artistic ability” as their authenticity; their scenes seem to Lonoff so theatrical that he cannot take them entirely seriously—their play-acting supposedly drowns their authentic feelings in a sea of empty histrionic gestures and cheap emotions.

Thus, in *The Ghost Writer* a negative valuation of the theatre may seem to prevail. But that impression is deceptive; in fact, Lonoff’s disapproval is not unambiguously endorsed by Roth. First of all, the antithesis between Lonoff and Abravanel is susceptible to reversal: although Lonoff loudly proclaims that he “has no self,” he has ego enough to be flattered by the attentions of his youthful admirer—something for which Abravanel does not really have time. Abravanel’s self, on the other hand, may not be quite as boundless as one usually expects from such a media figure. “In the flesh,” Nathan says, “he gave the impression of being out to lunch.” Not his ego is boundless, but the outward show that is meant to hide it, his charm “like a moat so oceanic that you could not even see the great turreted and buttressed thing it had been dug to protect. You couldn’t even find the drawbridge” (*The Ghost Writer* 42). The well-hidden, turreted thing might not be quite as “great, turreted and buttressed” as the moat that protects it seems to suggest. As for Lonoff, moreover, perhaps his role of priestly ascetic is only an *act* too. That he can depart from it becomes clear when in the conversation with Zuckerman he takes an “unforeseen plunge into street talk” (*The Ghost Writer* 51): “a blunt, colloquial, pointedly ungrandiloquent Lonoff seemed to take turns with a finicky floorwalker Lonoff as official representative to the unwritten world” (*The Ghost Writer* 49). And the picture of a histrionic Lonoff is completed when Nathan hears him taking a little holiday from being the stultified literary monk by “doing” the great Durante.

Secondly, as regards Lonoff’s view of the “scenes” with Hope and Amy, it is only on his own definition that the women’s behaviour is “melodramatic,” overdone: from *their* perspective, no doubt, *he* is unnaturally sustaining his act of self-renunciation, and they are only trying to break through it, and are themselves not play-acting but revealing their innermost (hysteric) selves. I will not say that this is how these scenes have to be read: for various reasons the text is more in

collusion with the perspective of Lonoff. But it should be noted that this collusion has an ironic twist, and that it leaves room for other viewpoints, other terms to describe its subjects—there is always a margin for crying out “wait, wait, but that’s only the half of it!”

I say this not in order to construct a supersubtle reading, but because it is exactly the positive aspects of “play-acting” that will gradually receive more emphasis in the subsequent novels. This development is prepared for in *The Ghost Writer*. What the whole of the Zuckerman saga forcibly suggests is that there can be no escaping play-acting, that there *is* no clear opposition between play-acting on the one hand and authentic selfhood on the other. Rather than authenticity, it is sincerity that matters, and play-acting is not opposed to sincerity: instead, the opposition becomes one between sincere and insincere (play-)acting. It is *in* play-acting that Zuckerman will finally have to resolve the conflicts of selfhood that he struggles with in the novels. To paraphrase Peter Tarnopol once more, if it is play-acting that gets Zuckerman into the identity crisis he is to suffer from, it is also play-acting that is going to have to get him out. In order to chart this development, I intend to discuss the most significant occurrences of the theatrical motif in the Zuckerman novels in the rest of this essay.

The motif of play-acting is exuberantly dominant in *Zuckerman Unbound*. Set as it is at the end of the zany sixties, this seems unavoidable, the period atmosphere playing a large part in the fears and anxieties that trouble Zuckerman. The book deals with some of the cultural aspects that gave the final push to the rise of what Christopher Lasch later termed the “culture of narcissism” of the seventies. Lasch writes that “[a] number of historical currents have converged in our time to produce not merely in artists but in ordinary men and women an escalating cycle of self-consciousness—a sense of the self as a performer under the constant scrutiny of friends and strangers.” This self-consciousness, he further writes, “derives in the last analysis from the waning belief in the reality of the external world.”¹⁸ Lasch himself links this uncertainty with developments in the arts,

18. Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: Warner, 1979) 165. Lasch’ book does not, of course, contain a scientific description of a factually objective state of affairs, but rather a fairly subjective interpretation of a number of cultural phenomena. Whether his interpretation is “right” or “wrong,” or whether it can even be judged in such terms, is irrelevant to my use of his book here: regardless of whether a “culture of narcissism” exists, Lasch’ *ideas* about it are well-known, and they do exist as objective facts. Roth himself, for instance, is bound to be aware of them, and he is not unlikely even to have read Lasch’ books. It does not seem inappropriate, therefore, to make use of Lasch’ formulations—as representative of a wide-spread view of some cultural developments in the sixties and the seventies—as background material, without implying that I myself fully agree with Lasch’ diagnoses.

notably the theatre of the Absurd, where “it crystallizes in an imagery of the absurd that reenters daily life and encourages a theatrical approach to existence, a kind of absurdist theatre of the self.”¹⁹ Lasch is not always convincing when he discusses literature, but that a sense of unreality grew as the sixties progressed is an often-voiced sentiment, expressed also by Roth himself in “Writing American Fiction” (1960; reprinted in *Reading Myself and Others* 173-191).

“To the performing self,” Lasch also writes, “the only reality is the identity he can construct out of materials furnished by advertising and mass culture, themes of popular film and fiction, and fragments torn from a vast range of cultural tradition, all of them equally contemporaneous to the contemporary mind.”²⁰ A riotous representative of this state of culture barges into the novel under the name of Alvin Pepler, Zuckerman’s “pop self,” a would-be writer who suddenly accosts Zuckerman on the street. He is obsessed by performance in show business and popular culture. Indeed, according to him, his tragedy has been that he has refused to play along in the game the TV producers wanted him to perform in, that he has always refused to be other than his natural self. Yet on the other hand, his self seems to be so infused with images from popular culture that it becomes hard to determine exactly what that self is. Even his telephone threats to kidnap Zuckerman’s mother seem to be no more than a bit of performance, and Zuckerman responds to them as such (although, being Zuckerman, of course he also breaks out in a sweat): “Friend, too many grade-B movies. The lingo, the laugh, everything. Unoriginal. Unconvincing. Bad art” (*Zuckerman Unbound* 212).

Pepler is not the only one who is affected by the escalating cycle of self-consciousness, however. Its effects are also demonstrated in the behaviour of Zuckerman himself, who has been rocketed from the relative obscurity of the republic of letters into the glamorous realm of television talk shows and glossy gossip columns by the overwhelming success of his novel *Carnovsky*. His sudden fame has two important results, not independent of each other: the first is to make him prone to a slight paranoia, and the second is to increase his feeling of self-importance and self-consciousness. It is, in fact, his increased self-importance that makes him slightly paranoid, makes him blind to certain facts and over-susceptible to others. In the first two chapters of the novel, this state of mind is mainly connected to the general state of culture as Lasch describes it, through such figures as Alvin Pepler and the actress Caesara O’Shea. These characters are used by Roth both in order to emphasize and to act as contrasts to the specific problems of sincerity that Zuckerman runs up against both in his public and his private life.

With the appearance of Caesara O’Shea, play-acting once more becomes an explicit subject. Not only is she an actress, she also moves in an aura of play-

19. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, 164.

20. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, 166.

acting that touches everything near her. Certainly Zuckerman is affected: “talking to Caesara O’Shea in the velvety back seat of a dark limousine, you came out sounding a little like Caesara O’Shea in the velvety back seat of a dark limousine. Appendicitis as a passionate, poetic drama” (*Zuckerman Unbound* 189). He becomes extremely self-conscious about his own behaviour, about what he does—“he didn’t want to appear to be trying to impress, given how hard he was trying” (*Zuckerman Unbound* 188)—and what he does *not* do—like embracing her: “No, he wasn’t about to impersonate his own hungering hero for the further entertainment of the fans” (*Zuckerman Unbound* 190).

Caesara is aware of the effect she has on men, and weary of it. The roles she plays have a tendency to get between her lovers and the reality of herself, and as she herself says: “How often can you get a thrill out of deflowering the nineteen-year-old novice of that touching first film, when she’s thirty-five and the mother of three?” (*Zuckerman Unbound* 194). But it is uncertain to what extent the ambiguity created by her play-acting really does make her unhappy. As Hermione Lee remarks, she is in fact one of Roth’s first female characters to hold interest as more than a stereotype; she certainly manages to be admirable without being a mere household goddess (as Claire Ovington, in *The Professor of Desire*, at times threatens to become).²¹ Her biography contains quite some ingredients for a disastrous life, but she still makes an extraordinarily resilient impression, and seems to be reading Kierkegaard’s *The Crisis in the Life of an Actress* to impress the high-minded Zuckerman rather than because of personal worries.

There is certainly, then, no hint of Zuckerman’s being cast in the role of heroic saviour, come to rescue the damsel from the hollow dungeons of Film. On the contrary: if anything, Caesara seems to have come to teach Zuckerman a lesson, which unfortunately he does not take to heart: how to deal with fame. Having experienced the debilitating effects of fame, she yet seems to know how to cope with it; Zuckerman, so the novel insists, does not. *Zuckerman Unbound* shows him continually at risk to get lost in a postmodern mirror land where selves do not exist and sincerity is a lie. In this postmodern waste land, the “unreal city” of the sixties, where he is accosted on the streets by crazy, masturbating misfits that might be plotting to shoot him or kidnap his mother, and where he has a one-night stand with a glamorous film actress who flies off the next morning for a tryst with Fidel Castro, Zuckerman’s sense of reality is severely put to the test. The whole world seems indeed to be a stage.

Even New York funerals cannot hide their essentially theatrical nature. In a funeral across the street from Zuckerman’s apartment, a gangland figure, Nick “the Prince” Seratelli, is lying “on display,” and passers-by stop “to identify the entertainers, athletes, politicians, and criminals who would be arriving to get a last look at the Prince” (*Zuckerman Unbound* 213). The funeral gets extended press

21. Cf. Hermione Lee, *Philip Roth* (London: Methuen, 1982) 77.

coverage, and when Zuckerman, to escape Pepler's anger, walks "[p]ast the prancing horse, the gaping crowd, past J.K. Cranford and his camera crew ('Hi, there, Nathan'), past the uniformed porter, and into the funeral parlor," we read that "[t]he large foyer looked like a Broadway theater at opening-night intermission: backers and burghers in their finest, and conversation bubbling, as though the first act had been a million laughs and the show on its way to being a hit' (*Zuckerman Unbound* 244).

The theatrical front of this everyday event is juxtaposed to the backstage practice. About one of the funeral directors we read:

Zuckerman had seen the fellow around, usually outside in the afternoon, talking through the cab window of a truck with the casket deliveryman. One evening he'd caught sight of him, dragging on a cigarette and with his tie undone, holding open the side door for the arrival of a corpse. When the lead stretcher-bearer stumbled on the doorsill, the body stirred slightly in its sack and Zuckerman had thought of his father.

(Zuckerman Unbound 244)²²

His father, although incapacitated and kept in a nursing home, is not yet dead at that moment. It is not quite clear *why* Zuckerman has to think of him. But what is clear is that it makes the funeral of "Prince" Seratelli, and even the very presence of the funeral parlor across the street from Zuckerman's apartment, a foreshadowing of the deathbed scene in Florida.

The reference thus links the two realms in which he faces problems of sincerity and play-acting: the public world of the New York media and the private world of his family. The results of his novel's commercial success on his public life are hilariously presented in the first chapters of the book. The results it has on his personal life, and especially on his relationship with his family, are explored in the scenes dealing with his father's death and its aftermath in the subsequent chapters. It is this personal crisis that is the book's central focus, of course. But the context of media cranks like Pepler, media personalities like O'Shea, and media funerals like "Prince" Seratelli's serves as an appropriate and suggestive backdrop, suggesting a wider cultural significance in Zuckerman's private ordeal.

It is at his father's deathbed that Zuckerman's feelings of unreality and

22. Cf. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1959) 128: "Throughout Western society there tends to be one informal or backstage language of behavior, and another language of behavior for occasions when a performance is being presented. The backstage language consists of reciprocal first-naming, co-operative decision-making, profanity, open sexual remarks, elaborate griping, smoking, rough informal dress, 'sloppy' sitting and standing posture, use of dialect or sub-standard speech, mumbling and shouting, playful aggressivity and 'kidding,' inconsiderateness for the other in minor but potentially symbolic acts, minor physical self-involvements such as humming, whistling, chewing, nibbling, belching, and flatulence. The frontstage behavior language can be taken as the absence (and in some sense the opposite) of this."

insincerity, of being an actor in a play, come to a head. What is perhaps most astonishing in this scene is the trouble Zuckerman has even here, faced with his father's imminent death, in struggling free from his self-consciousness, and from the theatrical. The term "deathbed *scene*" is doubly appropriate: the relatives' quibbling and his father's dying words nearly do turn it into a row. Also, Zuckerman is very aware of the moment as a "topos" in a literary and hence also in a theatrical sense. On the whole the scene is very moving, and Zuckerman's alternative "Genesis" becomes increasingly effective, up to the point where he decides to leave out of the account of the "Big Bang" theory the objections to the hypothesis of a universe endlessly being reborn after having imploded: "this information his father could live without. Of all that Dr Zuckerman had so far lived without, and that Nathan would have preferred him to live *with*, knowledge of the missing density factor was the least of it. Enough for now of what is and isn't so. Enough science, enough art, enough of fathers and sons" (*Zuckerman Unbound* 269).

This moving cadence, however, is undercut by Nathan's earlier self-consciousness about what attitude to take, what words to use. His sincerity is questioned not only by his choice of subject (a theory about the origin of the universe culled from a pocketbook read on the plane), but by the very fact that there *is* a *choice* of subject—that he worries about what to say, and not only before he starts talking, but during. His cousin Essie is the first to be taking leave of Victor Zuckerman, and Zuckerman wonders about the effectiveness and the appropriateness of her reminiscing about "the old winepress, the new American children, the sweet-smelling cellar, the crunchy mandel bread, and the mother, the revered and simple mother who baked the mandel bread" (*Zuckerman Unbound* 263). Is that such a good idea? he wonders. But then again, "[h]aving buried her share, maybe Essie knew what she was doing. Not that not knowing had ever worried her before. Precious time was passing, but Essie wasn't one to stint on details, nor did Nathan see any way to stop her now that she had the floor" (*Zuckerman Unbound* 263). Nathan's worry over Essie's "holding the floor" is entirely characteristic—as though they are giving a *performance*, in which he would hope to do better than his uneducated cousin. Who is supposed to be more of an expert on deathbed scenes than me, the hijink writer? he seems to say. The same mixture of persecution mania and inflated self-importance that was observable in the earlier chapters can here be discerned.

Characteristic also is his thought that "maybe Essie knew what she was doing." Because Nathan does *not* know. While he is holding forth on the creation of the universe, he keeps worrying whether he made the right choice of subject matter and treatment. "Oh, the mandel bread was a much better idea. Homely, tangible, and to the point of Victor Zuckerman's real life and a Jewish family deathbed scene" (*Zuckerman Unbound* 266). Nathan gets near to feeling competitive towards Essie about their respective speeches to his father—he feels

Essie is superseding him as the family's author. It is with this insight that the novel, which has shown Zuckerman at his most vainglorious, reaches a moral nadir.

In what way this crisis of sincerity, too, is related to play-acting becomes even clearer in connection with Zuckerman's quarrel with his brother Henry. First of all, the references to the theatre in chapter two are paralleled by the account of the abortive dramatic career of Henry in chapter four. In the plane back to New York after their father's funeral, Zuckerman remembers the violent scene upon Henry's announcement to the family of his decision to become a "drama major." A "scene" not only in the sense of a row but also in the theatrical sense, because Henry had "for days rehearsed" it at school with his friend Timmy, the director of the school play, "Timmy playing Dr Zuckerman like a miniature Lear, and Henry as a rather outspoken version of himself—Henry playing at being Nathan" (*Zuckerman Unbound* 278).

The reference to Henry's earlier ambition has further relevance, in that Henry says that it was a copy of Stanislavski's *An Actor Prepares* borrowed by Carol that once prevented him from breaking off his engagement to her. All this leads Zuckerman to use dramatic metaphors to describe his brother's messed up marriage. "*The Crisis*, thought Zuckerman, *in the Life of a Husband*" (*Zuckerman Unbound* 280), alluding to the book he found in Caesara O'Shea's hotel room. The advice he gives his brother is couched in terms of play-acting. "Maybe what you ought to start squeezing out of yourself is the obedient son," he says to him. "Come on, you're a bigger character than this. An actor prepares. Well, you've been preparing for thirty-two years. Now deliver. You don't have to play the person you were cast as, not if it's what's driving you mad" (*Zuckerman Unbound* 284). Not realizing the depths of a husband's emotional involvement in a marriage with children, the childless author thus tries to instill a cruelty in his brother that would otherwise seem acceptable only on a stage. "Now ... we can all be as cruel as we like," he'd said to Henry earlier, with "now" meaning "now that father is dead" (*Zuckerman Unbound* 281). And emboldened by Henry's own seeming "savagery" in confessing to *An Actor Prepares* being the "reason" why he married Carol, Nathan's holds forth against the filial meekness that keeps Henry leashed to a marriage that is "murder" to him.

Not that Zuckerman does not have doubts about the validity of his advice himself: "Inventing people. Benign enough when you were typing away in the quiet study, but was this his job in the unwritten world? If Henry could perform otherwise, wouldn't he have done so long ago?" (*Zuckerman Unbound* 285). Still he urges his brother to "squeeze out the obedient son." Thus he himself also fails to perform otherwise than as the way he is typecast in the family drama as the evil genius, the family's id.

It is impossible to make a conclusive judgement of the scene of the final parting of the Zuckerman brothers. Are we to sympathize with the excruciating

position of Henry, caught between and torn apart by the love for his family and his mistress? Or should we scoff at the hypocrisy of his attack on Zuckerman, whose advice may have been clumsy and destructive, but was also tendered with the best of intentions; and whose demolition—in the written world—of the Zuckerman family ideal in *Carnovsky* is surely no more devastating than Henry's demolition of the same ideal—in the unwritten world—by keeping a mistress on the side.²³ As always, Roth strikes such a perfect balance that it becomes impossible to judge Henry either way. For of course the accusations hold a lot of truth: Nathan *is* self-engrossed—a flaw that has increased with the extreme success of his fourth novel. So when Henry says that their father *did* call Nathan a bastard with his dying breath, this rings true, and constitutes a dizzying turn in the novel's "plot."²⁴ The remark is all the more devastating because it unwittingly responds to the very doubts that Zuckerman has been entertaining throughout the novel about himself and his books and his place in life. It points to the way in which Zuckerman himself is an actor—and not a failed actor like Henry either, but an all too successful one. As Mr Metz puts it: "You are their wordsmith ... You are their mouthpiece. You can say for everyone what is in their hearts" (*Zuckerman Unbound* 268). As Henry repeatedly complains, Zuckerman is an impersonator, a ventriloquizer who produces painful rip-offs of his relatives' intimate family life for all America to laugh at.

Thus, Zuckerman's crisis is essentially one of sincerity. As we have seen, this is manifested at his father's deathbed in the fact that he does not know what to do, does not know what is expected of him—when what is "expected" of him is, of course, simply that he be himself and talk "straight from the heart." When he counters his doubts about his choice of subject matter with the objection that "the oration on mandel bread was Essie being Essie, and this, however foolish, was

23. Exactly how shameful Henry's behaviour really is (not only does he have mistresses, he has had at least one passionate affair with a "Teutonic" *shikse*), is underlined by the parallel with Roth's early story "Epstein"—one of the very stories that outraged the Jewish community when it was first published. This parallel is one of the means Roth uses to show up the strange double standard that led to the attacks on his work in the fifties and the sixties: apparently, to his critics it is less wrong indulge in unethical behaviour oneself—as Henry and Lou Epstein respectively do—than to criticize the unethical behaviour of others—as Zuckerman and Roth have done.

24. After what I have said about the role of interpretation in Roth's work, it will come as no surprise if I maintain that readers who flatly accept Henry's interpretation of Victor Zuckerman's dying breath take too simple a view of the matter. Henry's "reading" certainly carries most emotional force, and seems on the whole the most plausible; but it is not, in the final analysis, the only possible one. The inaudibility of the final word is stressed too much for that.

himself being himself” (*Zuckerman Unbound* 266), he is being naive. Roth spends about a thousand pages on the question of what Zuckerman’s self might really be, so it cannot be this simple. Henry’s accusations are too plausible not to cast a shadow over this too: “The origin of the universe! When all he was waiting to hear was ‘I love you!’ ‘Dad, I love you’—that was all that was required!” (*Zuckerman Unbound* 288). That there are moments when the novelist’s literary indirection are inappropriate is one lesson Zuckerman is taught here. Not all occasions in real life require “know-how” to carry them off successfully. Essie, certainly, does not “know” what she is doing, any more than anyone else does on such an occasion: there is no standard appropriate “act.” In this respect, Zuckerman’s uncertainty also becomes a little less alien: if nobody really knows what to do in the face of someone’s death, most everyone probably insecurely wonders if perhaps someone else *does* know what to do.

The crisis started in *Zuckerman Unbound* extends into, and deteriorates in the course of the next novel, *The Anatomy Lesson*, in which four years after his father’s death, Zuckerman still has not written another book. He suffers from a prolonged writer’s block and a mysterious neck pain, conceivably psychological results of the paternal curse. Zuckerman has begun to realize that there is a cruel, an inhuman side to his profession that he has always denied or deliberately ignored. For instance, there is a Polish refugee who takes up with Zuckerman and does her best to get him emotionally (as opposed to merely sexually and literarily) involved in her situation. But, we read,

[a] writer on the wane, Zuckerman did his best to remain unfazed. Mustn’t confuse pleasure with work. He was there to listen. Listening was the only treatment he could give. ... Monstrous that all the world’s suffering is good to me inasmuch as it’s grist to my mill—that all I can do, when confronted with anyone’s story, is to wish to turn it into *material*, but if that’s the way one is possessed, that is the way one is possessed. There’s a demonic side to this business that the Nobel Prize committee doesn’t talk much about.

(*The Anatomy Lesson* 391)

As the “demonic side” of the writer’s trade starts to weigh heavier on Zuckerman’s conscience, he is increasingly led to idealize the medical profession. Eventually, he even decides to embark on a second career. After all, doctors “talk in earnest to fifty needy people every day. From morning to night, bombarded by stories, and none of their own devising. Stories intended to lead to a definite, useful, authoritative conclusion” (*The Anatomy Lesson* 373). So Zuckerman decides to enrol in Chicago medical college.

But although the medical profession is the dominant metaphor as well as a major theme of *The Anatomy Lesson*, the theatrical motif is not entirely absent either. In fact, it again occurs here in connection with the death of a parent. At his mother’s funeral, Zuckerman experiences a very similar sentiment of alienation to

the one felt at his father's deathbed: "He didn't feel like a son who'd just witnessed his mother's burial, but like an actor's understudy, the one they use in rehearsals to see how the costumes look under the lights" (*The Anatomy Lesson* 466). And when on the morning of the funeral he waters the plants in his dead mother's apartment, we read:

All this sentiment. He wondered if it was only to compensate for the damage that he was reputed to have done her with the portrait of the mother in *Carnovsky*, if that was the origin of these tender memories softening him up while he watered her plants. He wondered if watering the plants wasn't itself willed, artificial, a bit of heart-pleasing Broadway business as contrived as his crying over her favorite kitsch show tune. Is this what writing has done? All that self-conscious self-mining—and now I can't even be allowed to take purely the stock of my own mother's death. Not even when I'm in tears am I sure what gives.

(*The Anatomy Lesson* 332)

The difference with the Zuckerman of *Zuckerman Unbound* is perhaps that here he asks the crucial question himself—"Is this what writing has done?"—instead of having it put to him by his brother. His belief in the legitimacy of his craft is shaken; he believes that the accusations are true, that his novelistic ventriloquizing *has* made him insincere.

What Zuckerman forgets is, of course, that artists do not have a corner on play-acting. What Roth seems to be arguing in *Zuckerman Bound* and especially in its sequel, *The Counterlife*, is (somewhat in the spirit of Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*) that *everybody's* life consists mostly of a certain amount of play-acting. Zuckerman loses sight of the fact that the medical profession he idealizes is itself not entirely devoid of self-doubt and the ambiguities and insincerities of play-acting. What he still has to learn is not only that there is no escaping theatricality for him, but that his problem is not just a matter simply of sincerity *versus* play-acting.

Zuckerman's emotional problems at his relatives' funerals—his father's in *Zuckerman Unbound*, his mother's in *The Anatomy Lesson*, and his brother's in *The Counterlife*—are a case in point. Of course it is not simply a case of professional deformity, of "writerly detachment" run wild. The problem of sincerity, of how to "know how to" feel at relatives' deaths, is not peculiar to Zuckerman, or indeed to artists in general. Because it is hard *not* to think of the standard clichés, everybody easily feels insecure, either hollow or fake—whereas any actual "originality" (Zuckerman's decision to relate the Big Bang theory at his father's deathbed would be a case in point) is easily construed as a pretence, a show. Put differently, death is so ungraspable that the only human thing *is* not to know how to react, with what emotions to respond to it. In a religious community there are fixed rituals to channel the grief, but to a thoroughly secular mind like Zuckerman's such means are not available. Zuckerman's feeling of not acting

appropriately, of not having the proper thoughts and emotions, is not predominantly a sign of his disaffection from his family or the callousness of the writer's trade, but a sign of his modernity.²⁵

In order to come to grips with this "modernity," however, Zuckerman needs in some way to transcend the reductive antithetical mode of thinking that simply *opposes* sincerity to play-acting. Perhaps it is for this reason that Roth wrote, as a sequel to *Zuckerman Bound*, *The Counterlife*, a novel in which the imagination, man's ability to create fictions, is finally *celebrated*, with far less reserve than ever, instead of being anxiously questioned. Zuckerman's doubts about the sincerity of his sentiments at the funerals of his parents is echoed in its first chapter, at the funeral of his brother, for whom he has failed to write an appropriate, non-literary eulogy: "Entering the synagogue with Carol and the kids, he thought, 'This profession even fucks up grief'" (*The Counterlife* 18). In this way, *The Counterlife* takes the position of the earlier novels as its point of departure. But it soon moves on to quite another position, summed up by the following remark of Zuckerman to his brother: "Look, I'm all for authenticity, but it can't begin to hold a candle to the human gift for playacting. That may be the only authentic thing that we *ever* do" (*The Counterlife* 142). This does not so much resolve the earlier problems of sincerity and authority that the conflict with his family created, but dismantles them by seeing them not as problems but as simple facts of life.

This is also precisely the way in which problems that originally seem to be exclusively artistic, with little relation to "ordinary people's" problems, prove in fact to be quite general issues. As the quotation indicates, it is not just the artist's gift, but the generally *human* gift for play-acting that *The Counterlife* celebrates. We may get an inkling of what Roth is alluding to from this slightly ironical passage from an interview:

It's amazing what lies people can sustain behind the mask of their real faces. Think of the art of the adulterer: under tremendous pressure and against enormous odds, ordinary husbands and wives, who would freeze with self-consciousness up on a stage, yet in the theater of the home, alone before the audience of the betrayed spouse, they act out roles of innocence and fidelity with flawless dramatic skill. Great, great performances, conceived with genius down to the smallest particulars, impeccably meticulous naturalistic acting, and all done by rank amateurs.

25. That this is also close to Roth's own views becomes clear from the following passage from his autobiographical *Patrimony*: "I find that while visiting a grave one has thoughts that are more or less anybody's thoughts and, leaving aside the matter of eloquence, don't differ much from Hamlet's contemplating the skull of Yorick. There seems little to be thought or said that isn't a variant of 'he hath borne me on his back a thousand times.' At a cemetery you are generally reminded of just how narrow and banal your thinking is on this subject (*Patrimony* 20-1)." The quotation shows how *Patrimony* is a sincere book exactly by admitting to the impossibility of the common idea of sincerity.

People beautifully pretending to be “themselves.” Make-believe can take the subtlest forms, you know. Why should a novelist, a pretender by profession, be any less deft or more reliable than a stolid unimaginative suburban accountant cheating on his wife?

(*Reading Myself and Others* 144-5)

Close verbal parallels to this passage are found in the ghost-interview with Maria at the end of chapter four of *The Counterlife*: “After reading ‘Christendom’ twice I went upstairs, and when my husband came home, I began to wonder which was real, the woman in the book or the one I was pretending to be upstairs; I was not myself just as much as Maria in the book was not myself” (*The Counterlife* 251). In contrast with *Zuckerman Bound*, however, it is the joyful aspects of the comedy of adultery that are stressed in *The Counterlife*, both in the account of Henry’s adulterous affair with his assistant and in the account of Zuckerman’s cuckolding an Englishman in New York. The attitude toward play and play-acting is altogether less judgemental in *The Counterlife*—there is a greater sense of licence, of possibilities. Even the author himself promiscuously indulges in the unconventional freedom of giving his characters several different lives within the covers of one book.

To see exactly in what ways Roth “celebrates” play-acting in *The Counterlife*, I will discuss below first the role it plays in the account of Zuckerman’s marriage to the English Maria; and second the novel’s reiteration of the theme of Henry’s anger at Zuckerman, and Zuckerman’s perception of Henry as an actor. This last issue will finally lead to what is a new element in the Zuckerman novels, exclusive to *The Counterlife*, viz. the political and ethnic dimension of the question of identity and play-acting. By including the episode of Henry’s flight to Israel in the second and third chapters, Roth now incorporates larger dimensions of the issue of the definition of selfhood in his novel more explicitly than ever before. Inasmuch as some kind of conclusion is reached in Zuckerman’s quest for selfhood, it is now more than ever not only as a man, an American, and a novelist that Zuckerman defines himself, but also very crucially as a Jew. And in connection with the various aspects of ethnic self-definition I hope to show not only what role the notion of play-acting has in it, but also how Roth’s novelistic meditation on that problem involves on the one hand transcending the simple antithesis of authenticity versus theatricality, and on the other hand a consideration of the role played by difference in the creation of meaning, and hence of selfhood.

To become aware of the distance Zuckerman has travelled, *The Counterlife*’s ending is most usefully compared to *The Ghost Writer*. Although *Zuckerman*

Bound is a structural whole, with a “thematic architecture”²⁶ of its own, *The Counterlife* is not just a separate sequel; its ties with the trilogy consist of more than just subject matter and characters. *The Counterlife* and *Zuckerman Bound* might together be regarded as a diptych. I have already remarked on how marital problems are employed as a running commentary on issues of fiction and truth in the Zuckerman novels. Thus, the marriage of Zuckerman and Maria can be seen in useful contrast to that of the Lonoffs—the one young, hopeful and promising, the other old, unhappy and stale. If it seems a little unfair to compare Zuckerman’s marriage, which has only just begun, to Lonoff’s, which is visibly at the end of its tether, one has to bear in mind that that is exactly part of the point that Roth wants to make.

I have already discussed the failed marriage of the Lonoffs. I will therefore mention here only two points. The first is that the conflict seems to be over authority. In this respect, Lonoff’s mistake may well have something to do with his profession: as a husband, he cannot relinquish the authority he is used to having as an author. Nathan, in his turn, seems to make essentially the same mistake, not only in his unhappy affairs, but also in his books. His brother certainly feels *silenced* by them:

when Nathan began publishing those stories that hardly went unnoticed, and after them the books, it was as though Henry had been condemned to silence. ... Whenever he sat down to read one of the dutifully inscribed books ..., Henry would immediately begin to sketch in his head a kind of counterbook to redeem from distortion the lives that were recognizably, to him, Nathan’s starting point.

(*The Counterlife* 209)

And a few pages further on we find Henry fulminating once more against

his version, *his* interpretation, *his* picture refuting and impugning everyone else’s and *swarming* over *everything*! And where was his authority? Where? If I couldn’t breathe around him, it’s no wonder—lashing out from behind a fortress of fiction, exerting his mind-control right down to the end over every ego-threatening challenge! ... Everyone speaking that bastard’s words, everyone a dummy up on his knee ventriloquizing his mouthful! My life dedicated to repairing mouths, his spent stopping them up—his spent thrusting those words down everybody’s throat! In his words was our fate—*in our mouths were his words*!

(*The Counterlife* 235-6)

But Nathan’s “monologism” is not quite Roth’s, of course. In Roth’s novels, Zuckerman’s voice is frequently overshadowed and proved wrong by others, so that

26. Roth talks of “a certain thematic architecture” in the first three novels of *Zuckerman Bound* in an interview with *The London Sunday Times* (*Reading Myself and Others* 137).

these works can be seen as the product of a more “dialogic imagination.” This is not to say that his novels present a totally democratic (or anarchic) interplay of voices entirely. Even when Henry finally gets his say in chapter four of *The Counterlife*, his words are slightly undermined from within; although less biased than Zuckerman’s own three thousand word account of his brother, Henry’s account of Nathan is not entirely fair either (probably because Roth is inevitably slightly more in sympathy with the writer than with the dentist brother). Yet that too is part of Roth’s intention, which is to show the impossibility of both total “monologism” or total “dialogism.” In the novels, dialogism operates exactly *within* the bounds of a single personality. It is not possible to ignore “the other” entirely, every self is a self shot through with discourse from and about others.

It is exactly this that Zuckerman finally comes to acknowledge himself in the plurality of *his* novel in process (for *The Counterlife* can also partly be read as a novel *by* Zuckerman, like *The Ghost Writer*):

I suppose it can be said that I do sometimes desire, or even require, a certain role to be rather clearly played that other people aren’t always interested enough to want to perform. I can only say in my defense that I ask no less of myself. Being Zuckerman is one long performance and the very opposite of what is thought of as *being oneself*. In fact, those who most seem to be themselves appear to me people impersonating what they think they might like to be, believe they ought to be, or wish to be taken to be by whoever is setting standards. So in earnest are they that they don’t even recognize that being in earnest *is the act*. ... All I can tell you with certainty is that I, for one, have no self, and that I am unwilling or unable to perpetrate upon myself the joke of a self. It certainly does strike me as a joke about *my* self. What I have instead is a variety of impersonations I can do, and not only of myself—a troupe of players that I have internalized, a permanent company of actors that I can call upon when a self is required, an ever-evolving stock of pieces and parts that forms my repertoire. But I certainly have no self independent of my imposturing, artistic efforts to have one. Nor would I want one. I am a theater and nothing more than a theater.

(*The Counterlife* 323, 324-5)

This, then, is Zuckerman’s version of having no self “in the everyday sense of the word,” as Lonoff said of himself. But there are two differences. First, Zuckerman implies that *no one* really has such a self: other people impersonate too, only in many cases their repertoire is more limited. More importantly, Zuckerman realizes the importance of *choosing* one’s role—in this case, that of a loving husband. In a lot of what Lonoff says a kind of stoic fatalism shimmers through—“this is the way I am and I’m sorry, Hope, if I can’t change myself or be more accommodating.” The need to accommodate, however, is exactly what Zuckerman touchingly puts forward at the end of *The Counterlife*, in his imagined letter to Maria:

We could have great times as Homo Ludens and wife, inventing the imperfect future. We can pretend to be anything we want. All it takes is impersonation. That is like saying that it takes only courage, I know. I am saying just that. I am willing to go on impersonating a Jewish man who still adores you, if only you will return pretending to be the Gentile woman carrying our minuscule unbaptized baby-to-be.

(*The Counterlife* 325)

It was exactly the *will* to construct such a more positive “domestic fiction” that seemed lacking in Lonoff.

The happy end of *The Counterlife* is, of course, both ambiguous and precarious. It is ambiguous in that it is possible to read the “Christendom” chapter merely as a posthumous novella from a novelist deceased on the operation table, and precarious in that it actually ends with a quarrel—we read about Zuckerman’s good intentions, but we don’t actually witness the couple make up. Still, the overall tone is hopeful. This final hopeful note is rather new in Roth’s fiction. Joy and glee had always been pervasive, but truly affirmative endings did not really seem to agree with him. In “Writing American Fiction” (1960) he had concluded with the observation that many contemporary novels ended with a celebration of the self. “What I have tried to point out is that the vision of self as inviolable, powerful, and nery, self imagined as the only seemingly real thing in an unreal-seeming environment, has given some of our writers joy, solace, and muscle” (*Reading Myself and Others* 191). This was obviously not the kind of celebration he himself was looking for: “Finally, for me there is something unconvincing about a regenerated Henderson up on the pure white lining of the world dancing around that shining airplane” (*Reading Myself and Others* 191). Yet although Roth’s ideas about the self differ from those of the novelists he discusses—notably Saul Bellow—still in *The Counterlife* we do get *his* version of a celebration of the self: the self as performance.

Another way in which the notion of the self as performance plays a role in this novel is in its reiteration of Zuckerman’s tendency to describe his brother Henry’s marital plight in terms of theatrical “miscasting.” In *Zuckerman Unbound*, Henry tried to assert the validity of certain values *beyond* play-acting: the roles of father and son have a concrete reality too, he claimed, and cannot be reduced to *roles* pure and simple. He said he had a *real* duty toward his son, just as Nathan should have felt a real duty to his father. Henry repudiates Nathan’s entire definition of his life—and by implication, of life in general—as play-acting. Yet *The Counterlife* blithely continues the metaphor, and talks of Henry’s affair with his assistant Wendy as his “drop of theatrical existence” (*The Counterlife* 21). The day when he interviews her and starts to toy with the idea of seducing her “was just one of those days when he felt like a movie star, acting out some grandiose whatever-it-

was” (*The Counterlife* 35). And of course their actual liaison starts with a “pretend-game”: “‘Look,’ he said, ‘let’s pretend. You’re the assistant and I’m the dentist.’ ‘But I *am* the assistant,’ Wendy said. ‘I know,’ he replied, ‘and I’m the dentist—but pretend anyway’” (*The Counterlife* 38).

In the first chapter of *The Counterlife*, one does not find Henry protesting against these descriptions yet. In the second chapter, however, where Henry does not die on the operation table but flies to Israel to start a new life as a born-again religious Jew in a settlement in Judea, the same sibling rivalry as in *Zuckerman Unbound* becomes manifest. Only this time the stakes are different. This time Henry *has* decided to “rewrite” his life, to change roles and start anew. Zuckerman is understandably astonished at what he calls “the *part* you seem to have assigned yourself in the tribal epic” (*The Counterlife* 113; my emphasis). But Henry himself forcefully denies any theatricality in his new-found role. Like his “guru,” the extremist Jewish settler Mordecai Lippman, he stresses the reality of the settlement, and the way he assumes it grapples directly with history, how it is rooted in the world of action, the *reality* that Henry believes his brother to shield himself from with his fiction, his novels and his view of life as a nonstop theatre show. Lippman, too, puts the antithesis in terms of play-acting versus taking real action, of fiction versus reality: “I am not someone sitting in a cosy cinema; I am not someone playing a role in a Hollywood movie; I am not an American-Jewish novelist who steps back and from a distance appropriates the reality for his literary purposes. No! I am somebody who meets the enemy’s real violence with my real violence, and I don’t worry about the approval of *Time* magazine” (*The Counterlife* 132).

Yet although Zuckerman is numbed by Lippman’s disputatious verbosity, is “outclassed,” this particular formulation will of course not pass muster. If Lippman is not theatrical, who *is*? Indeed, Zuckerman himself involuntarily speaks of Lippman’s “playing it a bit broader at his *performance* to give me a taste of what had confounded my brother” (*The Counterlife* 134; my emphasis). And moreover, Zuckerman knows all too well that there is only a thin line between acting (as “taking action”) and *play*-acting.

The falseness of this opposition between action and acting, between performance and real deeds is symbolized most powerfully in one non-symbolic *leitmotiv* in chapters two and three: the gun carried by Henry when he takes a little ride in a jeep with Nathan. This gun faintly echoes another episode of *Zuckerman Unbound*. At the end of that novel, after Henry’s accusations about how Nathan has killed their father, Zuckerman is driven home in a rented limousine, and he has the armed driver he hired for his protection show him his gun. In that novel, the gun had been something of a symbol of *le vrai*, while at the same time signifying the unreality of Zuckerman’s exaggerated fear of assassination.

In *The Counterlife* it is altogether more complex. Zuckerman does not feel at ease with Henry’s carrying a gun, and says: “I was totally obsessed by that gun”

(*The Counterlife* 117). Here, the gun is at once an expression of the immediate and vehement reality of the violence in the Middle East, *as well as* of the theatricality of it. Zuckerman's mind

remained on his pistol, and on Chekhov's famous dictum that a pistol hanging on the wall in Act One must eventually go off in Act Three. I wondered what act we were in, not to mention which play—domestic tragedy, historical epic, or just straight farce? I wasn't sure whether the pistol was strictly necessary or whether he was simply displaying, as drastically as he could, the distance he'd traveled from the powerless nice Jew that he'd been in America, this pistol his astounding symbol of the whole complex of choices with which he was ridding himself of that shame. ...

... What if who he shoots is me? What if that was to be Act Three's awful surprise, the Zuckerman differences ending in blood, as though our family were Agamemnon's?

(*The Counterlife* 112)

The pistol enhances Zuckerman's feeling of being trapped not so much in History (which Henry evokes to justify his choice for Israel over America) as in a play—or rather: in history *as* play.

Not surprisingly, the constitutive idea of this part of the novel is that Israel can be viewed as one gigantic theatre—and consequently, Jewish identity as in essence histrionic, confirming Roth's remark about “a kind of Jewish sensibility” quoted earlier. Thus we read that Zuckerman feels that in Israel he “had a walk-on role—as Diaspora straight man—in some local production of Jewish street theater” (*The Counterlife* 105). Subsequently, theatrical metaphors keep cropping up in the account of Zuckerman's trip to Israel. The description of the Wailing Wall is a clear example:

The Wall was symmetrically framed by a pair of minarets jutting up from the holy Arab compound just beyond, and by the two mosque domes there, the grand one of gold and a smaller one of silver, placed as though subtly to unbalance the picturesque composition. Even the full moon, hoisted to an unobtrusive height so as to avoid the suggestion of superfluous kitsch, seemed, beside those domes silhouetting the sky, decorative ingenuity in a very minor mode. This gorgeous Oriental nighttime backdrop made of the Wailing Wall square an enormous outdoor theater, the stage for some lavish, epic, operatic production whose extras one could watch walking casually about, a handful already got up in their religious costumes and the rest, unbearded, still in street clothes.

(*The Counterlife* 88)

In the same scene, when Zuckerman does not give a *shnorrer* quite enough money, the old man does not waste his time on the “cheap American” but shows him, “rather like a curtain dropping when the act is over, the back of his extensive

black coat" (*The Counterlife* 89). And a description of the landscape in Judea, rather than looking at it for its own sake, emphasizes its symbolic overtones, especially the antithesis of the pastoral idyll of England to "this unfinished, other-terrestrial landscape, attesting theatrically at sunset to Timeless Significance" (*The Counterlife* 117). It is more like a décor, a film set or a stage decoration, than a real place.

To top this off, Roth adds the burlesque chapter three to the account of Zuckerman's voyage, in which Jimmy Ben-Joseph's spectacular *coup de théâtre* parodically underlines this sense of Israel's theatricality. On the plane back to London, Zuckerman recognizes in Jimmy "a character a little like one of those young Americans the Europeans can't believe in, who without the backing of any government, on behalf of no political order old or new, energized instead by comic-book scenarios cooked up in horny solitude, assassinate pop stars and presidents" (*The Counterlife* 172). For rather confused political reasons, Jimmy says that he will force Zuckerman to help him hijack the plane. As long as he has not seen Jimmy's gun, however, Zuckerman does not take his "performance" quite seriously:

"You were made for the stage, Jim—a real ham."

"I *was* an actor. I told you. At Lafayette. But the stage, no, the stage inhibited me. Couldn't project. *Without* the stage, that's what I love."

(*The Counterlife* 174)

But then Jimmy shows him his weaponry, a grenade and a gun: "It was the pistol, Henry's first-act pistol. This then must be the third act in which it is fired. 'Forget Remembering' is the title of the play and the assassin is the self-appointed son who learned all he knows at my great feet. Farce is the genre, climaxing in blood" (*The Counterlife* 175). And the next thing he knows Jimmy's *coup* is brought to a mercifully quick end by two Mossad agents, who remind Zuckerman of the stage as well: the one is only a "silent sidekick" to the other, whom Zuckerman refers to as "the hustler" because "[h]is bright, sporty clothes, the tinted glasses, the tough-guy American English all suggested to me an old-time Broadway con artist" (*The Counterlife* 177).

The Mossad agent is not quite as harmless as a "hustler," however: he proposes to use a circumcision knife to "work on" Jimmy's body to extort information: "in the lavatory, you and me squeezed up in there, alone with the secret parts of your body" (*The Counterlife* 181), he says to him. The knife's glinting steel both echoes the pistol's barrel and foreshadows the act of circumcision that concludes the book. In the novel's concluding pages, the impossibility of a completely autonomous, a-cultural and a-historical existence is urged. The "Christendom" chapter tries to show that historicity encroaches even on the age-old lovers' dream of a quiet, paradisiacal, secluded existence. There is no escape, it argues, from either reality or culture. In fact, the two are largely the

same—reality is mostly human-made, a constructed reality.²⁷ The search for authenticity, for something pre- or extracultural, is itself a cultural myth. The fate of culturedness is finally accepted and even celebrated in a kind of “ode to circumcision,” circumcision being where the pastoral stops:

Circumcision is startling all right, particularly when performed by a garlicked old man upon the glory of a newborn body, but then maybe that’s what the Jews had in mind and what makes the act seem quintessentially Jewish and the mark of their reality. ... Quite convincingly, circumcision gives the lie to the womb-dream of life in the beautiful state of innocent prehistory, the appealing idyll of living “naturally,” unencumbered by man-made ritual. To be born is to lose all that. The heavy hand of human values falls upon you right at the start, marking your genitals as its own. Inasmuch as one invents one’s meanings, along with impersonating one’s selves, this is the meaning I propose for that rite.

(*The Counterlife* 327-8)

The interlocking of images serves to highlight the oversimplicity in thinking of fiction and action, of play-acting and “real acts” as completely discrete entities. Like the gun, the knife hurts, the blood that is shed is *real*. But there is also a highly theatrical side to *carrying* a gun, whether you do it to make a political statement, to scare off Arabs, or to impress your relatives. Conversely, circumcision is a highly ritualized act, but has, for all its “theatricality”, very real consequences: the act of acculturation, as the final pages of *The Counterlife* assert,

27. Such a wide-spread notion by now as almost to have become a commonplace. The book which most helped to spread the insight is, I take it, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s *The Social Construction of Reality* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971 [1966]). One often meets the idea in some form or other in postmodern literature and literature *about* postmodern literature (Brian McHale for instance quotes Berger and Luckmann’s book in his *Postmodernist Fiction* [London: Routledge, 1987]). Obviously, it leads to misunderstandings; there are limits to the “constructedness” of “reality”: little construction goes into a volcanic eruption. The standard criticism of postmodernism is that it is too rigid in applying the notion of constructedness to the extent of denying the existence of some form of objective reality. Clearly, Roth shows himself aware enough of the actuality of the violence in Israel to be immune to such claims. Let me briefly give an example: in a letter to Zuckerman, the Israeli Shuki Elchanan writes: “remember, if you take as your subject [Lippman’s] diatribe—or mine—you will be playing with an argument for which people *die*. Young people do die here for what we are arguing about. My brother died for it, my son can die for it—and may yet—not to speak of other people’s children” (*The Counterlife* 162). Some readers might regard this as an all-too-clever trick, facilely trying to prevent similar accusations to be levelled at *The Counterlife* itself. But it is not just precautionary cleverness: Roth himself *had* taken care, quite a bit before introducing Lippman himself, to remind his reader of this very fact, by having Zuckerman drive in a taxi whose driver’s son has been killed (99), and by giving the horrible details of the death of Shuki’s brother (88), firmly putting the entire argument “*dans le vrai*” from the start.

to a large extent determines one's life, determines the reality one lives.

Also, whereas the knife is here the symbol of man's entrance into civilization the very minute he is born, in the hijack scene it seemed to represent the summit of "civilized" savagery: political torture. At the same time, as the chilling reference to "the secret parts of your body" indicates, the agent's words were a parody on declarations of love, the knife savagely phallic, the proposed torture a travesty of sexual intercourse—a counter-mating.

By setting up such ironic dichotomies, Roth succeeds in collapsing or questioning conventional categories of thinking—in this instance, especially, the antithesis savagery/culture. Savage though he is, the torturer is yet the agent of a highly developed society, revealing how easily "civilization" may collapse back into "savagery."²⁸ The knife itself is merely a neutral object: the uses it is put to determine its "meaning." This is the essential point that the passage, indeed, the whole novel wants to make. The "heavy hand of human values" Roth knows to be inescapable, and even necessary. But no passive acceptance of those values is in question: they are, after all, *human*, which is to say fallible, and subject to questioning, challenging, change. Value and meaning have to be created, not passively received, they have to be acted out, performed as though life were indeed a play, and all the world a stage. It is only by creating meaning, by writing their own love story, that Maria and Zuckerman can succeed. The self is inscribed in cultural contexts, but is not determined by it. It has still to be constructed, by a positive act of will—and constructed in the awareness of its relativity, its instability, its constructedness. What Roth proposes is that if meaning is negotiated, is not stable, not God-given and predetermined, one has a duty actively to participate in its creation. This is why play-acting is far from insincere, harmful and undesirable, but, on the contrary, constructive, comforting, and mandatory.

This does not mean that anything goes. Thus, Henry's decision to return to his roots in chapter two is fundamentally insincere because the whole idea of roots, of the authentic is, if not entirely fake, at least far more ambiguous than Henry is willing to allow. It is not his play-acting that is wrong, but his refusal to acknowledge that he *is* acting a role, his naive belief that his *aliyah* makes him more real, more purely authentic than an assimilated American Jew. He is one of those who are "[s]o in earnest ... that they don't even recognize that being in earnest *is the act*" (*The Counterlife* 323).

The "heavy hand of human values" does mean is that the self is defined by way of differences, is relative. Just as the meanings of a word arise only from its

28. The use of the circumcision knife as torture instrument also cynically parodies the search for "authenticity": it used, after all, to get the "truth" out. Cf. also: "'We're going to ask you to give an account of yourself,' the Broadway hustler said to me. 'An account that we can believe'" (*The Counterlife* 178). Not truth, but credibility is what counts. The scene plays with many of the Zuckerman novels' central themes.

interplay with other words, so the self can exist only from its interplay with other selves. The novel's central question is: how can the self define itself as *of itself*, rather than merely in relation to its opposites? Its persistent answer is: it cannot. This becomes evident from the way the question of the Jewish identity is treated in the novel.

The longing for a less relative definition, for a more autonomous sense of self is evident in Henry's wish to be "directly and unstrainedly" Jewish in Judea. But it is also one of the drives behind Jimmy Ben-Joseph's crazy, confused pamphlet "FORGET REMEMBERING!":

ISRAEL NEEDS NO HITLERS FOR THE RIGHT TO BE ISRAEL!
 JEWS NEED NO NAZIS TO BE THE REMARKABLE JEWISH PEOPLE!
 ZIONISM WITHOUT AUSCHWITZ!
 JUDAISM WITHOUT VICTIMS!
 THE PAST IS PAST! WE LIVE!

(*The Counterlife* 169)

This pamphlet, in turn, seems to be strangely echoed in Zuckerman's claim at the end of the novel that in England he finds himself to be "[a] Jew without Jews, without Judaism, without Zionism, without Jewishness, without a temple or an army or even a pistol, a Jew clearly without a home, just the object itself, like a glass or an apple" (*The Counterlife* 328).

But the entire force of the novel's argument goes against the conclusion that anything like such an intrinsic, non-relational sense of identity is possible. A far more characteristic attitude towards the question of Jewish identity is found in the following passage from the letter Zuckerman writes to Henry on the plane back from Israel: "'What is a Jew in the first place?' It's a question that's always had to be answered: the sound Jew' was not made like a rock in the world—some human voice once said 'Djoo,' pointed to somebody, and that was the beginning of what hasn't stopped since" (*The Counterlife* 149). Exactly like "the sound 'Jew,'" one's selfhood is not "made like a rock in the world." The idea owes something to current notions about the nature of language and meaning in which difference (binary opposition) plays a major role. It is far from Zuckerman (or Roth) of course to suggest that Jewish identity depends on the definitions of Gentiles, or even of anti-Semites²⁹—but something of that relation does haunt the definition of self in all cases: you are defined by summing up all the things you are not.³⁰ Anti-

29. My interpretation is even somewhat tendentious: the "someone" who points his finger may have been a Jew too. That would, however, have implications for the rest of my discussion which I choose to disregard here; let us just say that the text is more richly suggestive than I can here do justice to.

30. Cf. "*Jews are people who are not what anti-Semites say they are*. That was once a statement out of which a man might begin to construct an identity for himself; now it does not work so well, for it is difficult to act counter to the ways people expect you to act when fewer and fewer people define you by such expectations" ("Writing about Jews," *Reading Myself and Others* 221).

Semitism is one extreme, and particularly harmful example of how one is usually defined (and, of course, *misdefined*) by the outside world and by one's relation to it.

Also, Zuckerman's claim about feeling like "a Jew clearly without a home, just the object itself, like a glass or an apple" is somewhat misleading, especially if quoted out of context. It actually occurs in a passage in which he contends that "England's made a Jew of me in only eight weeks" (*The Counterlife* 328), by which he means that he has become more assertively, more militantly Jewish because of England's latent anti-Semitism—which is to say through opposition, in relation to the outside world. His short visit to his brother in Israel, on the other hand, and his meeting with extremist colonists in Judea, made him feel more militantly defensive than ever about his "renegade" identity as a successful American novelist married to an English *shikse*. As he puts it himself, he is "[a] Jew among Gentiles and a Gentile among Jews" (*The Counterlife* 328). Thus, it is exactly through opposition that Zuckerman defines himself. As he said earlier: "I suppose it can be said that I do sometimes desire, or even require, a certain role to be rather clearly played that other people aren't always interested enough to want to perform" (*The Counterlife* 323).

This oppositional stance is characteristic of Zuckerman's regained confidence. It is not so much that he has reconciled the demands of life and art, of authenticity and fiction, or of play-acting and sincerity, but rather that he has transcended these simple oppositions. It is not that Roth (or Zuckerman) totally surrenders the ideals of sincerity to irresponsible play-acting. He merely asserts that it is only through play-acting that sincerity may be attained, just as it is through fiction ("lies") that a novelist may sometimes express a deeper truth. This is not simply a postmodern surrender to a facile, irresponsible relativism, something of which Roth has been accused particularly on the occasion of *The Counterlife*. Readers who find unbearable the idea of meaning created rather than given, a world constructed rather than simply existing, sincerity being acted out rather than simply found as a hidden essence—those readers seem only to want to escape what is inescapable, much like Maria, at the end of *The Counterlife*, wishing to escape from the book. Zuckerman's answer to Maria—the novel's concluding words—may be read as a reply to those critics, too: "To escape into what, Marietta? It may be as you say that this is no life, but use you enchanting, enrapturing brains: this life is as close to life as you, and I, and our child can ever hope to come" (*The Counterlife* 328).

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2. Secondary

This is not simply a list of works cited, but of books which have substantially contributed to my understanding of Roth's work, regardless of whether I have quoted them in my paper or not. Works that I only happen to have quoted, but that were not of central importance to my reading of Roth's work (e.g. *The Culture of Narcissism*) are not included here.

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