

THE MAJOR PHASES OF PHILIP ROTH

David Gooblar

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Articulating structural approaches to Philip Roth's oeuvre is, by definition, a daunting task. Roth is a prolific writer, with a career spanning over fifty years, in which two randomly picked novels might never appear to be by the same hand, or they may be unequivocally Rothian. So I undertook the review of *The Major Phases* with some reservations, only to be delighted at the clarity and articulateness of Gooblar's writing. Initially admitting the intrinsic difficulties of defining Philip Roth holistically, Gooblar refuses to compromise choices, and sets out to strike a balance between two recent critical approaches which consider, both of them validly but selectively, the writer's gaze as moving either "outward" towards the "republic of culture" (Posnock 2006) or "inward" towards "human subjectivity" (Shostak 2004). Stressing that "such unity is impossible to declare", Gooblar proposes to "break Roth's career into clusters of books, positing 'phases' of Rothian preoccupation while trying not to lose sight of the cumulative whole" (4, 6).

A glance at the contents page shows that Gooblar's monograph devotes the first two of six chapters to individual volumes —*Goodbye, Columbus* (1959) and *Portnoy's Complaint* (1967)— whereas in the ensuing four chapters, it addresses "clusters" of several works. This apparent imbalance responds to Gooblar's stress on how much of Roth's later production is influenced by the conception of and critical response to these early works, a point he will make repeatedly.

Chapter One recalls the early visceral reactions to the stories in *Goodbye, Columbus*, when an almost unknown Roth was targeted for his unflattering characterizations of “faithful” Jews (13). Gooblar contextualizes the allegedly self-hating Jewish protagonists of these stories in the cultural and political milieu of the 1950s, a time when New York liberals, in the wake of the Holocaust and of the Stalinist purges, had become skeptical of cultural or sociopolitical institutionalization. Such protagonists embody the inception of a *leitmotiv* of Roth’s narrative: the ambivalent, self-questioning and non-conformist character, and later writer-double (22). The novella is examined through the symbolic implications of Neil’s “seeing” American Jews’ identity as divided between a new rich suburban class and earlier inner-city working-class origins, its final image featuring Neil as “characteristically Rothian [...] poised between an inward focus on [...] the self (Shostak’s situated subject) and an outward focus on [...] literature (Posnock’s republic of culture)” (31).

Chapter Two locates Roth’s position in the early sixties as paralleling that of the 1940s generation of Jewish intellectuals (Lionel Trilling and Philip Rahv) who aspired to engage with the “serious” Anglo-American literary canon. Attempting transcendence from the Jewish literary niche toward a position as “serious intellectual” and commentator on American culture at large (33-35)—a transition that also haunted Saul Bellow in his early work (42-43)—, Roth became influenced by Henry James, in the wake of Trilling’s influential critical voice, producing two minor somber novels in a Jamesian mode before fully finding his voice with *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969). A milestone in Roth’s career, the narrative mode of Portnoy—an extended psychoanalytic monologue— would influence Roth’s later self-examining fictions. In the wild late 60s, Portnoy becomes a character who is comic in his concern about being serious (47-48), by embracing ‘high literature’, pursuing *shiksas*, and shedding his father’s Jewish background. Signalling Roth’s authorial freedom to engage with Jewishness, Portnoy’s vital progress symbolically enacts (in a Jewish comic mode) precisely the (serious) dilemma of Roth trying to become a hyphen-free “American Writer” (55-57).

The following chapter vindicates Roth’s literary position in the difficult, experimental seventies, following Irving Howe’s charge of his lack of a “personal culture” (1972). Instead, Gooblar claims that Roth’s fascination with Kafka (and this writer’s city, Prague) and his themes of entrapment inform part of this personal culture, while the figure of Anne Frank informs another. Close-reading Roth’s essay-story “Looking at Kafka”, Gooblar emphasizes this writer’s significance (beyond the obvious *The Breast*, 1972) as mentor and alter ego, establishing an interesting connection to *The Professor of Desire* (1977), where Kafka becomes a dual symbol of sexual/intellectual unfulfillment. An illuminating discussion follows of *The Ghost Writer* (1979), first of the Zuckerman novels. The Anne Frank literary fantasy that Zuckerman envisions here (having survived, she lives in the US under a new identity, Amy Bellette) is related to the romanticized Broadway

adaptation of “The Diary of Anne Frank”, which edited out its Jewish specificity.¹ Building from Cynthia Ozick’s critique that all appropriations of “The Diary” are objectionable, Gooblar aptly points out that Ozick’s position is actually enacted in Zuckerman’s envisioning of Amy Bellette’s despair at a staged version of her story which erases its singularity: “American culture has usurped her identity [...] by its own need to draw certain lessons from the Holocaust” (85-86).

Covering the period 1974-1985, Chapter Four points at *Portnoy’s Complaint* as forerunner of a cluster of works where psychoanalysis “becomes almost essential to an understanding of the fiction” (90) in *My Life as a Man* (1974), *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981), *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983) and *The Counterlife* (1986). These are works featuring fictional “writer doubles”, Zuckerman or Tarnopol, centred on the re/discovery of the self, a literary transposition of Freudian psychoanalytic practice (95). Gooblar traces an evolution from the (optimistic) quest for self-knowledge of the early Portnoy towards its gradual, despairing, narrowing in *The Anatomy Lesson* (and in *The Prague Orgy*) where, slipping into a ‘Freudian lock’, eventually “Zuckerman cannot escape his identity as a writer, but, as a writer, he cannot write without some method of self-reflection” (98). Escape from this lock is suggested via narrative therapy, a practice Gooblar adopts as a framework to read *The Counterlife*. Rather than attempting to “uncover” a preexistent latent self (Freud), individual human experience itself can be “storied” or “narrativized”, i.e. turned into a valid construction of the self: “each character becomes the author of his or her own story [...] they] all act like novelists” (102, 103). Gooblar singles out *The Counterlife* as a watershed for the next Rothian phase (Chapter Five: Nonfiction Writings), concerned with writer/character doubling, questioning accuracy in the representation of reality and the self, and the ethics of exposing autobiographical truth, issues explored, in varying modes, in *The Facts* (1988), *Deception* (1990), *Patrimony* (1991) and *Operation Shylock* (1993). Beyond the multiple narrative effects that Roth performs in each work (textual framing, genre-crossing, and writer doubles) I find especially interesting Gooblar’s reference to the *Operation Shylock* (aka *Duality*) drafts in the *Library of Congress* which reveal Roth’s original structural plan for these works: “TWO-FACED. An Autobiography in Four Acts. 1. *The Facts*, a Novelist’s Autobiography 2. *Deception*, a Novel 3. *Patrimony*, a True Story 4. *Duality*, a Novelist’s Fantasy” (112). The closing novel, whose outrageous plot stems from a “Philip Roth” writer-double in Israel narratively competing with the original Philip, is stressed as illustrating the life-long concern with “authorial liberty” over one’s material. A scene of *Operation Shylock* where Philip is harangued by a Mossad agent on *loshon hora*² is related to Roth’s deep-seated malaise at the reception of *Goodbye, Columbus* (127, 129).

Chapter VI looks at the “American Trilogy” —*American Pastoral* (1997), *I Married a Communist* (1998), *The Human Stain* (2000)— Roth’s most explicit engagement with “the state of the nation” (151) in three convulse eras. Gooblar

proposes here that rather than a shift away from the self-reflexive narratives many critics quote, this stage deals centrally with the “interaction between self and society [...] between self-determination and social determination” (132) and, thus, echoes the Jewish concerns of *Goodbye, Columbus*, but now in relation to the broader American canvas. Establishing an interesting link with early 1950s novels featuring Adamic protagonists³ or “protean” heroes, he emphasizes how the self-fashioning of Coleman Silk, Ira Ringold or “the Swede”, whether in ethnocultural or ideological terms, is ultimately dismantled by the collective/social forces dominant in each era. I am tempted to add, extending Gooblar’s point further back into American literary history, that the quest for self-fashioning in the face of (adverse) social forces is a central theme in Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), the book Hemingway famously named as the origin of “all modern American literature” (22).

Gooblar develops his brief conclusion from the line “There’s no remaking reality” in *Everyman* (2006), parenthetically enclosing “(there’s no)” to underline — drawing various threads— how much of Roth’s work is ambivalently about trying to refashion “realities” while it is also about being defeated by reality in these attempts, as the writer-doubles typically illustrate. Contemporary *front matter* listing policy of his work under the headings “Zuckerman Books”, “Kepesh Books”, “Roth Books” and “Other Books” is noted as a “particularly Rothian trick of giving a sense of unity (as if there was a plan all along) while dividing” (156) but Gooblar concedes this may be a publishing strategy. More rewardingly, he does underline how the first four novels in the new millennium — *The Dying Animal* (2001), *The Plot Against America* (2004), *Everyman* and *Exit Ghost* (2007)— complete, and apparently close, each of these *writerly* categories.

The output of criticism on Philip Roth is to date impressive,⁴ especially since the 1990s, and Gooblar’s bibliography cannot be all-inclusive. Yet I find two striking absences, Alan Cooper’s *Philip Roth and the Jews* (1996) and Stephen Milowitz’s *Philip Roth Reconsidered: The Concentrationary Universe of the American Writer* (2000), significant studies that shed light on the relevance of Israel and the Middle East, Jewish Diaspora, and the Holocaust, vis-à-vis a large part of Roth’s work. On the more theoretical front, and allowing for Gooblar’s preference for (well argued) psychoanalytical approaches to assess Roth’s later works, I do feel a more explicit acknowledgement might be made of its postmodernist underpinnings, discussed by several Roth scholars over the past decade. Yet all things considered, David Gooblar’s book is a very valuable contribution to Philip Roth studies, in that it argues very persuasively how much of the young writer’s self persists within the mature author’s literary and textual concerns, while proposing original and insightful approaches to some of Roth’s key works and major phases.

Notes

¹. The “Diary” was introduced in the US in 1952 by American-Jewish writer Meyer Levin, a reporter in World War II and witness to the concentration camp horrors. Levin wrote a stage production adaptation, which was finally rejected in favour of a commercial, mainstreamed version by professional scriptwriters. This led Meyer Levin into intricate litigations with the producers (81; cf. Levin’s own account in *Obsession*, 1974).

². Or *Lashon Hara*, meaning “Evil Tongue”: Biblical laws related to gossip and slander, expounded by Polish rabbi Israel

Meir Kagan (1838-1933), commonly known as the “Chafetz Chaim”, precisely after the title of his famous work on this subject (cf. <http://www.torah.org/learning/halashon>).

³. J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), and Saul Bellow’s *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953).

⁴. A very helpful list of Philip Roth criticism, efficiently organized by academic categories, is available at the “Resources: Research” link at *The Philip Roth Society* site: <http://rothsociety.org/>

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