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- 1 In his 1984 discussion of the art of fiction, Philip Roth observes that, although he has always pursued his own line of work, his books have never been detached from his country's history and culture or from his personal experience and reading. Indeed, Roth argues, "[t]here's always something behind a book to which it has no seeming connection, something invisible to the reader which has helped to release the writer's initial impulse" ("The Art of Fiction" 234). In response to this remark, David Gooblar's *The Major Phases of Philip Roth* takes up the invitation to explore the stages of Roth's development as a writer with close attention to his specific modes of cultural engagement.
- 2 The Timeline in the book's preamble, which in fact offers a condensed preview of the perspective to be developed in later chapters, juxtaposes the novelist's biography to his works and to the historical, cultural, and literary context. Tellingly entitled "Inward/Outward," the introduction structures the book around the concept of dynamic movement. Gooblar's analysis is guided by the observation that "Roth's intense and durable self-consciousness has ensured a focus on the formation of identity, both in the ways in which the self is constructed and understood and in the ways in which the self is affected by the world 'out there,' by culture, but also by history, by other people" (6). Having identified the oscillation between inward and outward perspectives as a defining characteristic of Roth's writing, the author aims to arrange Roth's body of work into chronological "clusters of books" that correspond to the various "phases of Rothian preoccupation" (6). Conscious that "Roth's fiction shows a writer particularly open to the culture around him," Gooblar aims to remain open to "unexpected cultural connections"

- (7). In particular, he intends to bring to the discussion discourses that he feels will shed new light on Roth's writing, namely, the changing face of liberalism, the rise of the so-called New York intellectuals, the legacies of the Holocaust, and the psychotherapeutic practice of narrative therapy, among others.
- 3 Following the introduction, the book is divided into six more chapters that discuss the "self-conscious and deliberate zig-zag" of Roth's career and follow the dynamics of "an inward or outward turn from Roth" (9, 8). The first two chapters focus on Roth's early career in the 1950s and investigate his constantly revisited self-definition as an American writer. The careful analysis of *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959), *Letting Go* (1962), *When She Was Good* (1967), and *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) brings to light "a synchronicity of influences on Roth, from the intellectuals of the time who extolled the conflicted, ambivalent, autonomous individual, and from the sensitive and coercive community imposed by his identity as an American Jew" (31). The author concludes that "the only determining category [Roth] ever fully submitted to has been that of the writer" (32).
 - 4 The argumentation in the next two chapters focuses on Roth's series of outward moves following the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint* up until *The Counterlife* (1986). Chapter 3 investigates Roth's Prague visits in the 1970s and the close literary relationship he developed with Czech writers of the twentieth century. Although Gooblar acknowledges Roth's "fascination with the Other Europe," he does not interrogate it further in terms of literary relationships. It seems to me that the question of Roth's relation with Kundera is particularly relevant here because of all Roth's Central European contemporaries, none stands closer to him, both as a friend and as a fellow writer. Even if the analysis is not pushed further, the contribution from this angle is not negligible and sheds light on Roth's engagement with the history and culture of the "Other Europe."
 - 5 Gooblar takes the analysis further by setting out to explore Roth's readerly connection to Kafka. The discussion of the essay "I Always Wanted You to Admire My Fasting" or, Looking at Kafka" (1973) and *The Professor of Desire* (1977) shows that "[w]hereas the claustrophobic atmosphere and personal paranoia of Kafka's fictional world can easily be seen as a precursor to life under the totalitarianism of the twentieth century, Roth's work in the 1970s demonstrates that Kafka is perhaps equally evocative when used to illustrate smaller-scale—yet no less maddening—problems of powerlessness and bewilderment in the face of a personal reality" (74). This conclusion reminds one of Kundera's 1982 preface to *The Professor of Desire* where the Czech novelist observes that to a man living under political repression, "Kafka speaks of the impotent loneliness of the individual in the face of an implacable political power." To Roth's American protagonist, "Kafka speaks of the solitude of an impotent man facing the implacable power of his body. These two interpretations do not contradict each other; but rather they complement each other: they refer to two opposite sides of the same essential human helplessness" (Kundera p. v). The analysis of Roth's use of Kafka progresses into an investigation of his appropriation of another important Jewish writer, Anne Frank. The argumentation takes an interesting turn when the author brings into the discussion Cynthia Ozick's passionate essay "Who Owns Anne Frank?" published in 1997 on the occasion of a revival of the Hacketts' version of *The Diary of Anne Frank* on Broadway. The comparison between the representation of Anne Frank in *The Ghost Writer* (1979) and Ozick's opposition to any appropriation of Anne Frank and the Holocaust demonstrates Gooblar's intimate knowledge of the American literary scene and its interconnection with Roth's writing.

- 6 The novelist's dialogic engagement with his culture is further explored in a detailed investigation of Freud's presence in his fiction. Chapter 4 discusses Roth's fascination and growing frustration with the limits of the Freudian model of self-storytelling. Gooblar argues that although the desire to escape the self is present in *The Prague Orgy*, "[i]t is not until *The Counterlife* (which follows *The Prague Orgy*) that Roth finds a way for Zuckerman to escape the structures of the self as Freud conceives it: unified, unchangeable, forever tied to the events of the past" (99). Interestingly, *The Prague Orgy* (1985) is only mentioned in passing whereas other critics consider the epilogue to the *Zuckerman Bound* trilogy as the precursor of Roth's fragmented postmodern narrative *The Counterlife*.¹
- 7 Gooblar defines *The Counterlife* as "a watershed in Roth's career" (109). He interprets Roth's exploration of alternative stories of the self as a result of his having abandoned Freud and adopted a more fluid narrative form similar to the process pursued by narrative therapy. The approach of narrative therapy, "although dependent on the work of many earlier theorists and therapists, was first outlined in its entirety in Michael White and David Epston's 1990 book *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*," explains the author (100-1). Although this work was published three years after *The Counterlife*, which makes it "difficult to claim that Roth was familiar with the practices of narrative therapy while he was writing his novel," Gooblar argues that it is certainly possible that "Roth was familiar with many of the theorists that White and Epston cite as forerunners to the ideas of narrative therapy, such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and anthropologist Edward Bruner" (101).
- 8 Instead, what one would wonder about is whether Roth's formal audacity in *The Counterlife* and his sudden preoccupation with history in the subsequent American trilogy, which includes *American Pastoral* (1997), *I Married a Communist* (1998), and *The Human Stain* (2000), may well have been inspired by his engagement with twentieth-century European history and literature. Joseph Benatov, for instance, argues that the narrator Zuckerman in the American trilogy reflects "Roth's marked shift in the 1990s away from the obsessive psychology of the self toward a deeper and more mature historicity." If it is thus possible to distinguish two thematically and stylistically different moments in the total Zuckerman production, he suggests, "it may be worth considering the significance of the Prague novella and Roth's Czech experience for his professional transition into the postsocialist present" (Benatov 130).
- 9 Although Roth has never been effusive about the literary influence of his contemporaries, in his 1984 interview about the art of fiction, he emphasizes its importance: if novels effect serious changes, these changes take place only in "the handful of people who are writers, whose own novels are of course seriously affected by other novelists' novels" ("The Art of Fiction" 246). How other contemporary novelists' novels affect Roth's work is certainly a question Gooblar's book evokes but does not address, especially when he discusses Roth's trip to Prague as a possible "catalyst for the direction Roth's career would next take" (61).
- 10 Gooblar continues his argumentation by turning in the final two chapters to Roth's four autobiographical fictions (*The Facts* [1988], *Deception* [1990], *Patrimony* [1991] and *Operation Shylock* [1993]) and to his engagement with his culture's history in the American trilogy. The analysis connects the ethical issues that arise from Roth's autobiographical writing with "his earliest battles with Jewish readers over his initial published work" (126), and also, through a consideration of how writing affects others, with the ethical inquiry that continues in *I Married a Communist* and *The Human Stain*. Indeed, Gooblar observes, both

these novels “feature memoirs that threaten or enact exposure and betrayal, echoing a central concern of Roth’s ‘autobiographical’ books of the late 1980s and 1990s” (132). Whereas for most critics, *I Married a Communist* and *The Human Stain*, and the trilogy they form with *American Pastoral*, mark a new turn in Roth’s career, Gooblar’s analysis of these novels in his final chapter demonstrates that some of the central concerns of the trilogy, such as “the interaction between self and society, between the individual and his community, between self-determination and social determination,” reflect the themes running through Roth’s debut collection, *Goodbye, Columbus* (132). The author’s particular achievement in the final chapter is the demonstration that “far from breaking with [Roth’s] previous work, the ‘American trilogy’ shows many continuities with the rest of [his] work, exhibiting preoccupations that have drawn [his] scrutiny for more than 40 years” (132).

- 11 At the end of this well-written study, one comes to appreciate Roth’s long career as “both unified and divergent” and therefore resisting the idea of any ultimate interpretation. The book’s beautifully simple and fluid style makes it particularly engaging for the general reader, and one almost forgets that *The Major Phases of Philip Roth* is in fact a demanding study which requires that the reader be familiar with Roth’s entire body of work. The book demonstrates the interconnectedness of Roth’s early and later writing and shows the fruitfulness of reading Roth’s fiction with an eye to the literary, social, and cultural contexts. The particular value of this study lies in the fact that it conceives of Roth’s body of work as being in a flux, and not fixed, and suggests directions for additional development.

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NOTES

1. For instance, Pia Masiero points out the importance of *The Prague Orgy* for it “ushers us into the multiple narrative bifurcations of *The Counterlife*” (95).

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