



The Philip Roth Society Newsletter

Vol. 6 No.1 & 2

2008 Double Issue

Message from the Society's President Derek Parker Royal

Change seems to be the defining theme for the Philip Roth Society this year. For instance, this will be the last time that I address all of you in this manner. After the current term expires in May 2009, I will be stepping down as president of the Philip Roth Society. As many of you already know, I founded the Roth Society in 2002, and, with the indispensable help of others—such as Jessica Rabin, David Brauner, Jay Halio, and Elaine Safer, just to name a few—grew the Society into something that will sustain. For the past six years I have served as the Society president, but now I feel it is time to move on and let others carry the responsibilities of the organization. We are holding our next elections in spring 2009—according to our constitution, elections for Society officers must be held every three years—and the call has already gone out for nominations. I am certain that whoever is elected president for this next term will carry the Roth Society into new and challenging directions. And, to whomever that person might be, I offer you all of the assistance and insights that I can provide. I will miss working with the So-

ciety as an officer, and I thank all of you for my two enjoyable terms.

However, this does not mean that I will no longer work with the Roth Society. I will remain the executive editor of the Society journal, *Philip Roth Studies*, and in such a role I will work closely with the next executive council. But here again, my work in this capacity is framed by change. We began the journal back in 2005 and were lucky enough to secure Helmfred Publications as our publisher. Now, and beginning with the first issue in volume 4 (2008), we are a part of Purdue University Press, sharing the publisher with such esteemed journals as *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* and *Studies in American Jewish Literature*. Due to the change in publishers, the journal is a little behind schedule but should be caught up by the end of 2009. The first issue of volume 4 (Spring 2008) just came out at the beginning of this year. It is our second special issue, one devoted to the literary relationship between Roth and Bernard Malamud, and guest edited by Victoria

(Continued on page 2)

About the Philip Roth Society

Founded in July 2002, the Philip Roth Society is an organization devoted to the study and appreciation of Roth's writings. The society's goal is to encourage academic conversation about Roth's work through discussions, panel presentations at scholarly conferences, and journal publications. It accomplishes this by disseminating information concerning upcoming events, calls for papers, and recent publications on Roth through this newsletter, through our website at <http://rothsociety.org>, by maintaining a listserv, and through the publication of *Philip Roth Studies*, a refereed journal devoted to Roth scholarship. The Philip Roth Society is a non-profit community of readers and scholars, and it has no affiliation with either Philip Roth or his publishers. The society is an affiliated organization of the American Literary Association, and we welcome both academic and non-academic readers alike.

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The Philip Roth Society Newsletter is published twice a year by The Philip Roth Society and is distributed to all dues-paying members. It is indexed in the MLA Bibliography, Modern Humanities Research Association's Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature, and the Index to Jewish Periodicals.

The Philip Roth Society Newsletter invites submissions of 500-800 words. Contributions may be informal in tone, and may address such matters as the teaching of Roth's work or personal reactions to it. We welcome notes that add texture or background information to larger elements of Roth's writing. For submissions or queries, contact Richard Sheehan, Editor, *The Philip Roth Society Newsletter*, 39 Forge Close, Fleckney, Leicester, United Kingdom, LE8 8DA, Email: richard.sheehan@btinternet.com

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<http://rothsociety.org>



Aarons. The next two issues—Fall 2008 (vol. 4, no. 2) and Spring 2009 (vol. 5, no. 1)—are general issues and should be out by October. We will close the volume year with another special issue, “Mourning Zuckerman,” guest edited by Aimee Pozorski and Miriam Jaffe-Foger.

We have also changed the way in which Society members can subscribe to the journal. Now that we are with Purdue University Press, subscription to *Philip Roth Studies* can come with Society membership, something we couldn't offer when we were with Helref. Beginning in 2009, members of the Roth Society can choose one of either two membership options: joining the Society with a subscription to *Philip Roth Studies*, or joining without the journal. And as always, all members, regardless of membership option, are included in Society-based correspondences (receiving news on upcoming conferences, calls for papers, and other news regarding Roth scholarship) and receive a subscription to the Society newsletter. For more detailed information on our new membership options, see page 5 of this newsletter or visit the “Membership” page on the Roth Society website, <http://rothsociety.org>.

But the change does not end here. Beginning with this issue of the *Philip Roth Society Newsletter*, we have a different newsletter editor. Richard Sheehan will be taking over from Joe Kraus, and we should look forward to Richard picking up from and expanding upon the fine job that Joe has performed over the past couple of years. As editor, Joe brought several new features to the newsletter, and I and the Society owe him for all of the hard work he put into it. I know that I am not alone in wishing Joe the best, while at the same time

extending a warm welcome to Richard. This current newsletter, in fact, is actually a double issue, combining issues number 1 and 2 of volume 6 (2008). For those of you who may have anticipated patiently last year's newsletters, I hope you find this double issue worth the wait.

Yet, while there are a number of changes regarding the Philip Roth Society, some things remain the same. For instance, we will still be holding two panels at the annual American Literature Association Conference, this year at the Westin Copley Place in Boston, MA (May 21-24). And we will be doing what we have done over the past several years, sponsoring a roundtable discussion as well as a more traditional panel of papers. The latter will be a panel springing from the “Mourning Zuckerman” special issue this coming fall, and it will be chaired by its guest editors, Aimee Pozorski and Miriam Jaffe-Foger. The roundtable discussion, organized and moderated by Bernard F. Rodgers, Jr., will commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint*. And, as usual, we will be holding our annual Society business meeting at the ALA Conference, at which time we will welcome our new executive council for the next three-year term. Both panels and the business meeting will be held on that Thursday, May 21st, and I hope many of you plan to attend. For more detailed information on the Roth Society events at the ALA, you can find the conference program at <http://americanliterature.org>.

The Society also plans on offering a panel or two at the 2009 ALA Jewish American and Holocaust Literature Symposium, September 9-12, in Salt Lake City, UT. We have sponsored a number of panels at this symposium

in the past, and I would like for the Roth Society to continue its strong presence at this event. For more information on participating in this symposium, make sure you check out the "Calls for Papers and Announcements" section of this issue of the newsletter.

So as you see, many things remain the same, while at the same time the Society moves on. I truly appreciate all of your friendships, your collegiality, and your contributions during my time as president. It was not easy

starting an author society from nothing, but I could not have done this without all of your help. I hope that each of you will continue your involvement in the Philip Roth Society, and that you receive the next executive council with the same enthusiasm you have shown me. I will miss serving as the Society president, but I am looking forward to staying in touch and working with all of you. Thank you for a memorable six years.

Derek Parker Royal

Calls for Papers and Announcements

ALA Jewish American and Holocaust Literature Symposium Salt Lake City, UT (September 9 - 12, 2009)

The Philip Roth Society will sponsor a panel or two at this year's ALA Jewish American and Holocaust Literature Symposium, Sept. 9-12, in Salt Lake City, UT. The topic is open, and papers concerning any aspect of Roth's work are welcome. We would also welcome any proposals for ready-made panels concerning Roth, his fiction, and any cultural issues surrounding his texts. Abstracts for paper and panel proposals should be 250-350 words, and should be sent to rothsociety@gmail.com.

For more information about the ALA Jewish American and Holocaust Literature Symposium, please visit <http://www.jahlit.org/>.

Deadline for submissions to Roth Society panels at this conference is Friday, May 15th.

Upcoming Events

Philip Roth Society Elections

The Philip Roth Society is conducting its next round of elections this spring. As per our constitution, the Society holds elections every three years. For this cycle we are electing three members of the executive council: a president, a secretary/treasurer, and a program chair (reflecting our recent amendments to the constitution, we have added the new position of program chair, and the newsletter editor is no longer an elected position). Nominations have already been made, and soon all members will be electing officers. For more information on the status of the elections, please contact the outgoing Society president, Derek Parker Royal, at rothsociety@gmail.com.

American Literature Association Conference Boston, MA (May 21-24, 2009)

The Philip Roth Society will sponsor both a panel and a roundtable at the 2009 American Literature Association in Boston, MA. The topic of the panel will be "Mourning Zuckerman" (to complement our upcoming special issue of *Philip Roth Studies*) and the roundtable title will be "Then and Now—*Portnoy's Complaint* at 40." The Society will also hold their annual business meeting at the ALA Conference. All Roth Society-related events will take place on Thursday, May 21st.

“Seventy five, how sudden,”

A celebration of Philip Roth’s 75th birthday.

Miller Theatre, Columbia University

Philip Roth celebrated his 75th birthday at Miller Theatre on April 11 2008 in an event co-sponsored by Columbia University's American Studies Program and the Library of America.

Max Rudin, publisher of the Library of America, opened the event in front of a capacity audience at the theatre before handing over to two distinguished panels. The first consisted of the writers Judith Thurman, Charles D’Ambrosio, Nathan Englander and Jonathan Lethem, who discussed Philip Roth's impact as a writer.

Each member of the second panel selected specific books by Roth to examine, and comprised of literary scholars Joel Conarroe, Ross Miller, Hermione Lee, Claudia Roth Pierpont and Benjamin Taylor.

Hermione Lee then introduced Roth to the stage for a well received speech which concluded the event.

The following links can be used to listen to all the panels and then view the video of Philip Roth's concluding speech.

Audio

<http://blogs.wnyc.org/culture/2008/04/13/celebrating-philip-roths-75th-birthday/>

Video

<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/news/08/04/roth.html>

Philip Roth 50th anniversary celebration

On Tuesday, April 28, 2009 at 7 p.m., Queens College, City University of New York will host a 50th anniversary celebration of the work of Philip Roth.

In addition to Philip Roth, other featured attendees will be Norman Manea, Greil Marcus, Joyce Carol Oates and Norman Rush.

We hope to publish a report on this event in a forthcoming newsletter.



New Philip Roth Society Membership Information

Dear Philip Roth Society members and friends,

Beginning in 2009, members have a choice of two membership options: “Membership with the *Philip Roth Studies*,” and “Membership without the journal.” Both options include a subscription to the society newsletter, *Philip Roth Society Newsletter*, and all members, regardless of membership option, will be included in all future email notifications regarding Roth Society-related announcements, calls, and news.

OPTION 1: Membership with *Philip Roth Studies*

Membership to the Roth Society includes an automatic subscription to *Philip Roth Studies*. *Roth Studies* is a semi-annual peer-reviewed journal now published by Purdue University Press in cooperation with the Philip Roth Society, and is devoted to all research pertaining entirely or in part to Philip Roth, his fiction, and his literary and cultural significance. Annual membership fees for Membership with *Philip Roth Studies* is \$50 (add \$10 for overseas), which will include subscription to a full volume year (2 issues). For 2009 members, subscription to the journal will begin with volume 5, number 1 (Spring 2009).

OPTION 2: Membership without the journal

Regular membership to the Roth Society, but without a subscription to *Philip Roth Studies*. Annual membership fees for this option are \$20 (add \$5 for overseas addresses).

To join or renew your membership for 2009, for either the “Membership with *Philip Roth Studies*” or “Membership without the journal” option, please use the attached membership form and send to our secretary/treasurer, Jessica Rabin (jgrabin@atacc.edu), or visit the Society website and join/renew online using PayPal, <http://orgs.tamu-commerce.edu/rothsoc/membership.htm>.

NOTE: For those of you who have already joined for 2009 and want the journal along with membership, please contact Jessica Rabin and just pay the reminder for that option.

I am excited about the journal’s new relationship with Purdue University Press and what it will mean for Society members. For more information on the society, please visit its website at <http://rothsociety.org>. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

Derek

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Abstracts from Papers Delivered at Recent Conferences

An asterisk * indicates that the scholar is a member of the Philip Roth Society

MLA 2007, Chicago

"Never Again? Representations of Anti-Semitism in Jewish American Literature, Past and Present"

Brett Ashley Kaplan

Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2005) represents a futuristic anti-Semitic America with a chilling degree of plausibility but, as I argue in this paper, at the same time undermines the most frightening of its possible conclusions and thus presents a complex portrait of American anti-Semitism. Roth draws upon several prominent historical figures of 1940s American life, and rewrites history so that in place of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's final term, an anti-Semitic, Hitler-supporting Charles Lindbergh comes to power. Lindbergh, who often spoke anti-Semitically in large public forums, shared with Hitler a belief that international Jewry rampantly agitated for war. Roth depicts the fictional Lindbergh as a clever anti-Semite who incorporates prominent Jewish Americans into his schemes and who concocts and begins to enact "Homestead 42", a plan to deport Jews not to concentration camps but to the American Midwest where they are indoctrinated with gentile values. But while *Plot* presents a dystopic vision of a fascist America it also manages to be a love-letter to American resilience and to the capacity to absorb and accommodate change. In *Plot*, as the Lindbergh presidency gathers steam, anti-Semitic attacks run rampant in America, yet throughout the novel the young Philip Roth (character) nonetheless maintains his firm faith in the American dream. The novel closes with the restoration of democracy and with the assumption that American history will return to the course it actually did take—despite a short blip of fascist America and some gruesome deaths due to anti-Semitic rage.

Philip Roth and the Visual Arts

Chair and organizer: *James D. Bloom, Muhlenberg College

***Joshua Kotzin, Marist College**

American Literature Association Conference 2008

"Stamp Collecting and History in *The Plot Against America*"

The narrator of Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004) first introduces himself as "an embryonic stamp collector inspired like millions of kids by the country's foremost philatelist, President Roosevelt." (1). Young Phil's sensibility as a collector of stamps (the so-called *phil-atelist*) is defined against Sandy's ability to render a good portrait of anybody (including one of Lindbergh made using Phil's Lindbergh stamp). Throughout the novel, Phil projects his fears and anxieties onto his stamp collection. Early on, he has an emblematic nightmare in which his collection of twelve Washington bicentennial stamps transform into "Hitler" stamps and his set of ten National Park stamps become defaced by a black swastika. This nightmare shares much with the author Roth's method in the novel as a whole: if Lindbergh can retrospectively replace Roosevelt, why not Hitler as our founding father in Washington's place? Much later, Phil, in fact, does lose the stamp collection while sneaking off to the local orphanage. He is kicked by a horse and suffers amnesia, losing both his memory of the events and the album. All that remains as a souvenir of this episode is a letter opener in the shape of a Revolutionary War musket purchased during a family outing to Washington's home at Mount Vernon. Finally, then, the missing stamp collection operates as definitive proof for the uncertainty of "History," and especially a national, patriotic historical narrative. The stamp collection, in contrast to the musket replica, ought to be real, ought to have stability and value, and yet, in its inability to survive unblemished, its failure to preserve

the past it seeks to represent, demonstrates a view of an irredeemably fragile and shifting past.

***Stephanie Cherolis**

English Department - University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

“Visual Expressions of Loss: The Dying Animal and a Contemporary Crisis in Representation,”

Although many critics of *The Dying Animal* read the novel convincingly as a meditation on aging and loss in contemporary American society, few have considered the treatment of the visual arts in their discussion. Roth's work with visual representation is telling, however. Whereas typically scholars invested in the relationship between text and image privilege the image over the text, especially during moments of intense grief, valuing the image for its potential to tell a story when words fail, Roth's novel underscores the failure of both words and images, ultimately calling into question the value of an image as a medium to communicate trauma in the 21st century. To Roth, visual representation of loss via classical art and photography has, in the past, provided a way of expressing, and therefore working through, the most difficult traumas. But by the end of *The Dying Animal*, it appears that Roth finds such representation inadequate. Instead, we find a world in denial and those forced to face devastating loss alone and without the ability to reach out or connect as communication, visual communication of trauma has run aground. This failure of the visual is most obvious in two key scenes: the discussion of Stanley Spencer's *The Artist and his Second Wife (The Leg of Mutton Nude)*, 1937, and the moment when Consuela Castillo, David Kepesh's lover, asks to be photographed before having surgery on her breast to remove cancer. What each scene explores is a need to express the trauma of loss visually. As Kepesh describes, Consuela's need for documentation is as close to nature as one comes, as close to "an original drifting thought" as one gets (141). Consuela must document her loss, perhaps express in a way that invites witnessing. And yet, as natural as this move might be, Roth simultaneously describes the failure of any such attempt to express loss in the 21st century visually.

The first edition of Roth's *The Dying Animal* has *Le grand Nu* by Amedeo Modigliani on the front cover, and Kepesh later describes the woman in this piece to be Consuela's doppelganger. But, by the second half of the novel, Consuela is linked to a different, more modern work, Stanley Spencer's, *The Artist and his Second Wife*. This movement seems important to Roth's work on loss. Where the nude in Modigliani's art shows a beautiful and young body, Spencer's piece is one concerned not with celebrating youth and beauty, but loss, aging, and man's mortal existence. Where the nude is an empowered woman asleep across a "velvet black abyss" (98) that Kepesh associates with death, and so is residing on death, but seemingly unaffected by it, Spencer's woman is associated with raw meat, expressing a look of "melancholy resignation" (145). Spencer painted this picture after serving in World War I, and it seems to express the hopelessness of existing in the world after such a war, after fundamental beliefs about humanity have been called into question.

Here, Roth's text seems to connect up with contemporary concerns about an inability to express trauma in the 21st century. Modigliani's painting is a celebration, a resistance, much like the traditional elegy described by Jahan Ramazani. Spencer's portrait is described as a raw depiction of loss, marriage, and humanity. Like Ramazani's description of the modern elegy, the portrait is not a celebration, but a mourning without consolation. Similar failure occurs when Consuela asks to be photographed as a way of "saying goodbye to her breasts" (132). By carefully documenting her body before the breast surgery, she says she wants to "have pictures of my body as you knew it. As you saw it. Because soon it won't be as it was" (140). The photos memorialize what once was, and yet this too appears to fail as she never retrieves the photos. For Roth, traditional forms of visual representation are failing the 21st century, suggesting a greater crisis of representation.

**“I pledge a legion to the flag’:
 ‘Flag 1954-55’ and Roth’s Allegiance to Jasper Johns”
 *Aimee L. Pozorski, Central Connecticut State University**

In Philip Roth’s *Sabbath’s Theater* (1995), the U.S. flag symbolically connects two apparently unrelated events from the life of Mickey Sabbath — events that both seem marked by perpetual mourning. The first is the death of his mistress, Drenka Balich, in the present; the second is the war-related death of his brother, Morty, during WWII. It is not until the end of the novel, however, when these two deaths come together through Roth’s representation of Morty’s flag — a flag he finds in the bottom of a box called “Morty’s Flag & things,” and which he subsequently wears draped over his shoulders while urinating, at novel’s end, on the grave of Drenka.

Roth’s style in describing this old flag is surprisingly understated: foregoing his talent for pictorial representation, Roth tells us only that the flag is heavy and that it is folded. In one very brief paragraph, we learn, as Sabbath rummages all the way to the bottom of the box: “At the bottom, the American flag. How heavy a flag is! All folded up in the official way” (407). At first glance, this brief description seems far removed from the Pop-art rendering of Jasper Johns’s U.S. flag in his *Flag 1954-55*, an image, he says “was handed” to him in a dream. However, a closer look at the artistic attitudes of Johns, on the one hand, and Roth, on the other, reveals similarly ambivalent attitudes toward art, the U.S. flag, and their relationship to the U.S. Roth’s connection with the flag, then, is not so direct as an ekphrasis, and one could not so easily render the passages as “icono-textual”; however, Roth shows his allegiance to Johns by raising the flag to the status of artistic image — one that can be manipulated and challenged — in a way that supersedes its conventional political or patriotic meanings.

According to Fred Orton, the dedication on November 11, 1954 of the Iwo Jima Marine Memorial at Arlington National Cemetery likely played a role in Johns’s inspiration to depict the U.S. flag when he did (103). *Sabbath’s Theater* also takes the WWII era as the backdrop for Mickey Sabbath’s most compelling emotional moments — those moments leading up to, and then following, the death of his brother after being shot down above the Philippines. Like Johns, who created his *Flag* out of newspaper clippings from *The New York Times*, the *Nation*, and *The Daily News*, Roth considers in *Sabbath’s Theater* particular aspects of social and individual life that are, perhaps, trivial and superficial — although that, too, is part of their humour. For Orton, “it is a humour not occasioned at the expense of the flag, whose meaning is not obviously devalued by their discovery” (Orton 128).

Both Johns, then, and Roth after him, share a complex, yet still patriotic, relationship to the flag, despite the in-jokes, social commentary, and utter debasement of such a powerful image and representation of our national identity. And it is not just Morty’s flag that carries with it such an ambivalent status — both enshrined in a cardboard box and worn for the “patriotic” act of urinating on a grave. Fish’s flag, for example, “looks as washed out as the beach chair in the yard. If this cleaning lady were interested in cleaning, she would have torn it up for rags years ago” (398). And, even before Mickey gets to the flag in the box, he finds Morty’s yarmulke, constructed out of isosceles triangles of red, white, and blue satin . . . [with the words] God Bless America. A patriot’s yarmulke” (404).

Further, Drenka herself — the mistress of Mickey who drives him to such grief — makes patchwork quilts, “the American way,” she says. Given Drenka’s attitude toward America, and toward Mickey — she calls him her “American boyfriend” not less than five times in three pages — it appears as only fitting that, given her

difficulty in learning English, she would mishear the *Pledge of Allegiance* as proclaiming "I pledge a legion to the flag." She is not wholly wrong, since to some extent all Americans have pledged, for their country, a legion of men — a body of infantry — to do their bidding and fight on behalf of freedom. Morty, in fact, was one of those infantrymen. He was a part of the legion, and Sabbath realizes it: "he didn't die because he was a Jew," he finally understands, "Died because he was an American. They killed him because he was born in America" (405).

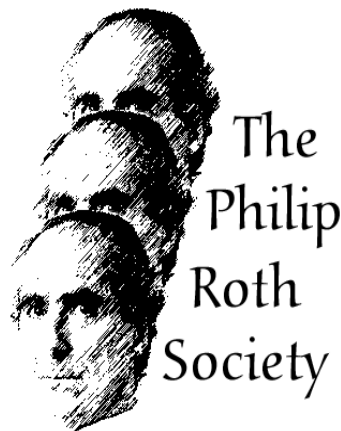
In this way, the flag at the bottom of Morty's box — a box containing important aspects of the protagonist's identity, is much like the contents of the briefcase revealed at the end of *'Invisible Man'* (another novel overwhelmed with the visual imagery associated with the stars and stripes). Like Ellison before him, Roth self-consciously depicts this iconic and patriotic image in ways that might also defile it — through sand, through urine. Drenka's son declares, after catching Sabbath in his last great act of the novel: "You desecrate my mother's grave. You desecrate the American flag . . . Wrapped in the flag." But, rather than being taken aback, Sabbath answers, "Proudly, proudly" (446). Roth, too, like Jasper Johns who appeared to "ridicule" the flag with his indecent and superficial construction out of newspaper clippings of everyday life, appears as proud of his flag, but not always the people it represents. Laurie Adams asks of Jasper Johns's work: "When does the flag cease to be a patriotic sign or symbol and become an artistic image?" The work of Roth, in his allegiance to the artistic practice of Jasper Johns, also begs that question. But it's a question that was, perhaps, answered by Ellison before we even knew what was being asked: The flag becomes an artistic image when it causes one to discover that "we were to affirm the principle on which the country was built and not the men, or at least not the men who did the violence" (574).

Panel: Roundtable Discussion on Philip Roth's *Exit Ghost*

Chair: *Derek Parker Royal, Texas A&M University-Commerce

Participants: * Alan Cooper, York College of the City University of New York; *Bernard F. Rodgers, Jr., Simon's Rock College of Bard; Michael Rothberg, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign; * Ruth Knafo Setton, Lehigh University *Debra Shostak, The College of Wooster

In what has become a tradition at the American Literature Association, the Philip Roth Society sponsored a roundtable discussion that generated free-flowing and open discussion and debate among the panellists and with the audience. The subject of this year's conversation was participants' initial reaction to Roth's final Zuckerman novel, *Exit Ghost*.

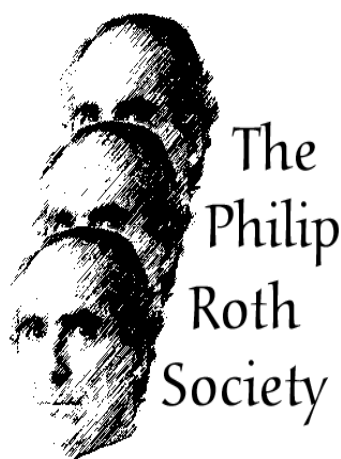


BRITISH ASSOCIATION FOR AMERICAN STUDIES**FIFTY-THIRD ANNUAL CONFERENCE****27-30 March 2008****University of Edinburgh****Ginevra Geraci****“The Sense of an Ending: Alternative History in Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America*”**

In a period of immanent crisis when comprehensive historical narratives are no longer possible - nor is utopia - dystopia, or rather uchronia tinged with dystopia, seems to be a rather effective means to construct a sweeping historical narration. Thus, after the end of history, Roth’s novel looks back at a counterfactual past in order to better investigate historical causality and to embrace past and present into a post-modern problematic perspective on the temporal dimension. It is the “timeless time” of uchronia in which — as Ricoeur explains in *Time and Narrative* (vol. III) — “we are torn between two fleeing horizons” so that “our present sees itself in crisis”.

Accordingly, the novel conclusion fails to provide a definitive and comforting order. When the fiction ends and factual history is resumed, chance — and not design — is the ultimate decisive factor. In fact, the novel *dénouement* is determined by Lindbergh’s disappearance, not by a final resurgence of good against evil, nor of democracy against fascism. In retrospect, this poses a serious question as to the inherent democratic nature of the American social fabric.

However, the initial and conclusive *peripeteia* has helped configure a governable fictive time, during which Roth — the author has called to life 9 year-old Philip — the narrator in an effort to control his troubling material and delve into the hidden meaning of the novel’s plot, which turns out to be both a conspiracy and a story line.



Book Review - Weequahic remembered.

Jews of Weequahic by Linda B. Forgosh

Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing

128 pp., \$19.99, ISBN 0738557633

Publication Date: June 2008

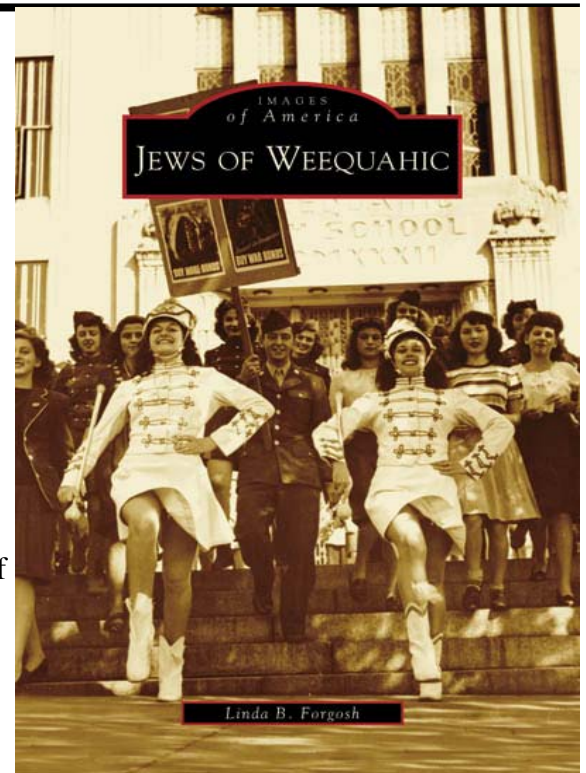
Long ago and far away (at least from my present home in Texas), the Weequahic section of Newark, New Jersey, was the site of a vibrant Jewish community from the 1930s into the 1960s. The lives of Weequahic's 35,000 residents are portrayed in this book. The portrait is primarily visual. Linda Forgosh has written a brief introduction to the neighborhood, but the heart of the volume is the hundreds of photographs that she has meticulously compiled, mainly from former Weequahic residents. Appropriate mention is made of children of Weequahic who became famous, of whom Philip Roth is the most celebrated. There is a photo of the home on Summit Avenue, now designated a Historic Site, where Roth lived until 1942. But the book has no individual star. Its leading character is the neighborhood.

To my untrained eyes, what stands out in the photos is time, more than place or ethnicity. There is no sense that Newark, and Weequahic in particular, were somehow different from comparable neighborhoods in Philadelphia, Cleveland, or Baltimore. (Perhaps they weren't; I don't know.) There is some feel for the Jewish character of Weequahic, but other than the names in the photo captions, a few of the stores and restaurants, and some of the fraternal organizations, not that much. The pictures of athletic teams and school classes and socials are pretty generic.

On the other hand, one does get a real sense of time. Of course, clothing and grooming, and buildings and cars place the photos in a particular era. Beyond the obvious, a number of the pictures are clearly from a long-gone period. We see, for example, students and teachers at Weequahic High School raising money to purchase war bonds during World War II. There's a shot of girls at sewing machines in their mandatory home economics class. Monroe Krichman's Certificate of Posture Achievement from 1951 appears with the caption: "Students in all grades were submitted to an annual posture examination as part of physical education and recreation." The 1943 high school diploma of Harold Heshy Blinder (his apparent nickname is shown without quotation marks) is pictured, listing how many credits he earned in English, social studies, bookkeeping, and other subjects. Among the classes that his contemporaries could have taken were Esperanto and millinery.

Many of the photos evoke a real sense of community. One sees it in the mom-and-pop stores on Bergen Street, a leading shopping venue in Weequahic. A wonderful picture shows Pearl Stein of Stein's Dry Goods "babysitting for Barbara Steinberg, whose parents owned the candy store next door." There is a chapter on "Weequahic Park: A Playground for All Seasons." In a time before air conditioning was common, families went to the park, with its 80-acre lake, for boating, fishing, and other activities in the summer. It was busy year-round, with ice skaters on the lake in winter.

My family moved to an apartment in Weequahic in 1949 when I was three. We lived there until leaving for a single-family home in the suburbs in 1957. The book brought back warm memories from my childhood—of Chancellor Avenue School (located next to Weequahic High), which I attended into the sixth grade, and stores and restaurants in the neighborhood. I especially enjoyed the photo of Syd's, which is accurately described as "the destination for hot dog lovers." I recall how pleased I was when my mother would let me go to Syd's for lunch and squeeze in with the big kids from high school to buy a frank with mustard, relish, and maybe sauerkraut.



My family's story was a common one. By the 1960s, many Jews had left Weequahic. Forgosh reports an estimated Jewish population of only 500 by 1977. Today the area, like Newark in general, appears to be largely African American. A number of photos depict the change. A former synagogue is now Union Chapel Church with "an active African American Episcopal congregation." Another one-time synagogue is home to the New Born Baptist Church, though one can still see Stars of David on the building. Athletic team photos from the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s were overwhelmingly white and featured players with names like Rothman, Greenfield, and Simon. A shot of the 1966-1967 Weequahic High basketball team shows thirteen black players and a lonely-looking Gerry Gimmelstob at the end of the back row.

The Weequahic of the middle third of the twentieth century is no more. The *Jews of Weequahic* provides a revealing photographic look at what it was.

Paul Lenchner
Texas A&M University--Commerce

Movie Review by Richard Sheehan

Elegy

Directed by Isabel Coixet. With Sir Ben Kingsley, Penélope Cruz, Dennis Hopper, Patricia Clarkson, Peter Saarsgard, Deborah Harry.
Screenplay by Nicholas Meyer
Release date - August 8th 2008, Running time - 111 Minutes

Considering the success Philip Roth has had as a writer it's somewhat surprising that more of his later work hasn't been adapted by Hollywood. *Goodbye Columbus* and *Portnoy's Complaint*, of his early works, proved moderately successful though I've searched in vain for the made-for-TV version of the *Ghost Writer*. Recently we've had *The Human Stain* with big name actors in the main roles (Anthony Hopkins, Nicole Kidman, Gary Sinise and Ed Harris) but this received criticism for miscasting as well as the hit and miss adaptation by Nicholas Meyer. The complexity and layering of the plot seemed lost in the film, though if it is watched without prior knowledge of the book - as I did initially - it fares a little better.

It was thus with some surprise that I noticed Nicholas Meyer's name associated with *Elegy*, a new film based on Roth's novel *The Dying Animal*. My recollection of the story was that there was hardly enough content on which to base a film so I was fascinated to see how it was going to be dealt with. Further news filtering through suggested that Ben Kingsley and Penelope Cruz would be involved; certainly big enough stars to carry a film, though the director, Isabel Coixet, was someone I was unfamiliar with.



First up, we meet David Kepesh - at this point a minor celebrity as a culture critic - being interviewed on TV about Thomas Morton and the Pilgrims of Merrymount, and it's in this section that Roth's narrative in the book about the permissiveness of the sixties is also very briefly touched upon. The film is then narrated by Kepesh, as per the novel - and, for the most part, it remains very close to the text although the ending is somewhat extended and there are a couple of curious alterations.



He describes his initial meeting with Consuela Castillo and the immediacy of the passion for her that rapidly overwhelms him. Their relationship grows to the point where she asks him to attend her graduation party to meet her family and friends. Kepesh's up until now latent fears that she will be spirited away by a younger lover come to a peak at this juncture where, petrified at what he perceives their reaction will be when confronted with her aged lover, Kepesh makes a feeble excuse for missing the party. We then have a scene of sublime Kingsley: In a dimly lit room, the camera focuses on his face as he listens to a phone message from Consuela who, heartbroken at his absence, decides that they should part. Kingsley says nothing, letting his face and eyes do the telling.

This is essentially Kingsley and Cruz's film with the other characters working around them. Kingsley is superb and plays the role with deep sensitivity. Initially, I was unsure about Cruz playing the role of Consuela. To me the character had seemed to have more of a young Salma Hayak about it, but credit to Cruz, as the film rolls on she grows into the role and by the end, when she returns to Kepesh to tell him of her illness, her performance

is nothing short of outstanding. In between we see brief cameos with Kepesh's long-term lover Caroline, played by Patricia Clarkson and his son (Peter Sarsgaard) whose roles again closely follow the book. The role of George O'Hearn - Kepesh's best friend in the novel - is played by Dennis Hopper and has been expanded in the film. This works well, giving Kepesh a sounding board and a counterpoint for a lot of the narration. Hopper plays this in a wonderfully understated manner, yet still manages to retain a mischievous charm.

As the latest film adaptation of Roth's work, I was pleased that it was close in feel to the novel. It has an art-house atmosphere to it - dark and moody, sparse and raw - yet the effect worked for me and helped to build the feelings of doomed love, sexual desire, regret, physical deterioration and looming death that haunt the book.

DVD Release Date: March 17, 2009



BIBLIOGRAPHIC UPDATE - Compiled by Derek Parker Royal

Below is a listing of secondary critical resources that have appeared since (or not listed in) the last issue of the newsletter. For a complete listing of bibliographical resources in English, go to the Roth Society Web site at <http://rothsociety.org>. An asterisk * indicates that the scholar is a current member of the Philip Roth Society

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Reading the Reviews – How the Reviewers See Exit Ghost

By Joe Kraus

As with Philip Roth's other recent novels, reviewers generally admired *Exit Ghost*, though many found one or another element to criticize. Most concentrated on the central fact of the novel – the apparent death of Nathan Zuckerman – and several took the opportunity to reflect on the overall arc of Roth's career even more than they reviewed the particular novel. Others, aware of a tendency among some readers to read Zuckerman as Roth, articulated instead a sense that fiction is more than any so simple equation; such critics typically praised Roth for his own recognition of the role of fiction in reflecting honestly on the world. Those who reflected on the novel directly tended to admire the bleak honesty of Roth looking into the mortality of a character whom he has inhabited so often across so many different novels. What follows are excerpts, selected idiosyncratically, from several of the major reviews of the novel. Most give a sense of the review's overall thesis, though some reflect what seemed a pertinent aside or a particularly astute observation about Roth's overall corpus.

Joel Yanofsky, *The Gazette [Montreal]* – October 20, 2007

Zuckerman, as always, talks a good game, a wonderful game. But, again, he can't be trusted. In fact, he's centre stage in the new novel, after having stayed mainly out of sight as the narrator of the last three Zuckerman books, *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist* and *The Human Stain*. In *Exit Ghost*, he's back: "Back in the drama, back in the moment, back into the turmoil of events!"

Michiko Kakatuni, *The New York Times*, October 2, 2007

This, of course, is Nathan Zuckerman's habit – continually to complicate his life on paper, while continually complaining about readers who would confuse fact and fiction, life and art.

As usual, Nathan, like his creator, anticipates the reader's question: "But isn't one's pain quotient shocking enough without fictional amplification, without giving things an intensity that is ephemeral in life and sometimes even unseen?"

His answer: "Not for some. For some very, very few that amplification, evolving uncertainly out of nothing, constitutes their only assurance, and the un-lived, the surmise, fully drawn in print on paper, is the life whose meaning comes to matter most."

Meg Wolitzer, *The Times [London]*, October 6, 2007

The flaws of *Exit Ghost* aren't caused by Zuckerman's ageing, but by his improvisational foray into "making do." The narrative gets its fitfully absorbing energy and its eloquence from his muttering, muted fury. As he tries to manage his diminishing world, he forces us not to look away.

Brain tumours, dementia and other hateful trappings of the twilight years – especially impotence and incontinence, those entwined provinces of the ever-central but now nearly ghostly penis – are all here, catalogued mournfully, obsessively, and described ferociously. Keep looking, Roth says. It only gets worse.

Stephanie Cross, *Daily Mail [London]*, October 5, 2007

As always with Roth, there are regular intervals of brilliance and occasional fine needles of wit. But as Zuckerman's memory becomes increasingly impaired, so *Exit Ghost* loses both momentum and focus. Meanwhile, the dramatic dialogue that Zuckerman, as a result of his infatuation, starts to write seems almost lazy from a writer of Roth's calibre.

James Ley, *The Age [Melbourne, Australia]*, October 6, 2007

There is a suggestion in *Exit Ghost* that Amy Bellette and Zuckerman, both terminally ravaged by age, represent not just the passing of a literary generation but a literary ideal. The novel is an affirmation and a defence of fiction as a way of understanding the world, a way of cutting through the superficialities of modern life. But this is coupled with a pessimistic sense that this understanding is being trampled by a crude literalism that interprets fiction through the author's biography, reducing what Zuckerman calls "the fluctuations of the novelist's mind" – which "puts everything in motion" – to a form of naive confession. As he is moved to remind Kliman, "a novel is not evidence." The question of the relationship between the writer and his work has often exercised Roth's imagination. He has deliberately blurred the boundary between fact and fiction in many of his works. Not only does Zuckerman's biography resemble that of his creator, several books, including the recent alternative history novel *The Plot Against America*, feature a character named Philip Roth.

But *Exit Ghost* is a novel about the need for literature to be understood on its own terms. For Roth, the essence of fiction's truth resides in its inherent doubling. It is a realm with no base reality, only layer upon layer of meaning and projection.

It is only by entering into this provisional world that one can appreciate what Zuckerman calls "the not-so that reveals the so."

Martin Rubin, *The Washington Times*, September 30, 2007,

But the chief effect of the city on Zuckerman is to stimulate in him engagement with life, the very thing he has avoided all those years in his New England exile writing those marvellous books. Like the aged Yeats, desire torments and excites him, reminding him that, despite his physical incapacities, he is still alive and, perhaps more importantly to him, serving as a spur to his imagination as a writer.

For just as *Hamlet* famously has a play within a play, so *Exit Ghost* has a play within the novel. Almost literally, for the imagined scenes between Zuckerman and a beautiful, rich, promising, accomplished

young writer whom he actually meets are rendered in dialogue form. This sets them off from the rest of the novel, with its horrors and devastations not only for Zuckerman but for others as well, and allows Mr. Roth free reign to give literary vent to the libido, which while certainly frustrated, apparently rages away nonetheless.

For in the end, if I may use yet another *Hamlet* reference, "the play's the thing." What is most impressive about *Exit Ghost* is the immense dedication of its author to the art of writing. Beyond all the pain, the devastation, the humiliation, the frustration, there is always for Zuckerman and for Mr. Roth the paramount act of literary creation.

Yoni Goldstein, *National Post [Canada]*, October 23, 2007

On the surface, little seems to separate the novelist Philip Roth from his fictional creation, the novelist Nathan Zuckerman. Indeed, the notable similarities between the two lives has encouraged a modern trend in literary criticism, whereby reading has become a species of psychoanalysis. Critics are now obsessed with finding links between the writer and his creations, hoping to glean insights into the mind of the former through the words and actions of the latter. In doing so, critics are destroying the novel. Characters are no longer independent persons, motivated by their own desires, haunted by their own fears. They are seen as no more than thinly veiled stand-ins for an author confessing his sins and emotions. The death of the writer, forecasted by the postmodernists, has instead brought about the death of imagination.

This is Philip Roth's message throughout *Exit Ghost*, the latest instalment in the Nathan Zuckerman story.

Guy Gavriel Kay, *The Globe and Mail [Canada]*, October 13, 2007

Craft goes a long way in fiction, especially at this level. And that, in fact, is one of Roth's themes here. Novels may emerge from life, from people known, events occurring, but to reduce them to this, to be seekers only after titillation and gossip and one-to-one correspondences, is to – in the author's words [or Zuckerman's] – indulge in "deadly literal-mindedness

and vulgarity that attributes everything to its source in a wholly stupid way.” The ferocity of the language is a signpost: Here is one of Roth’s lines in the sand, it is fighting ground for him.

The novel produced is not identical to the life – or lives – that inspire it. To think otherwise, to ponder – let’s be direct – if the fact that Nathan Zuckerman is impotent and incontinent and losing his memory means [my goodness!] that Philip Roth is, is to unendurably trivialize the act and art of creation. One could say [some have said] that by sailing so close to his own life so often, Roth invites it, and I doubt he’d deny it. His reply here is pretty clear: It is our job to decline the invitation. That isn’t what the writing is about. We can tell [Yeats again] the dancer from the dance.

Michael Dirda. *The Washington Post*, September 30, 2007

As a portrait of the artist as an old man, *Exit Ghost* delivers pages of great, sad power. But as a work of art it feels unfocused, never quite drawing together its various threads but, in the end, simply relinquishing them. At times I wondered if Roth was practicing what has sometimes been called the fallacy of imitative form – in this case, writing a slightly incoherent book to reflect the incoherence of his aging hero’s mind. At other times, I concluded that his lack of a strong plot, the weak fantasy playlet of “He and She,” the attack on the modern tendency to reduce art to a complex or an ism, and the many pages, albeit excellent in themselves, about George Plimpton were all typical of “late style,” that wild freedom characteristic of great artists in old age when they blithely ignore the expected conventions and disdain the polish of ordinary form and beauty. Toward the end of life, mere “art” seems to get in the way of truth.

David Gates, *Newsweek*, October 1, 2007

It’s what every aging writer feels: whether the torch gets passed or the past gets torched, you won’t be around. Zuckerman’s gone, but Roth is still with us; on the other hand, Zuckerman will still be with us when Roth is gone. As the dying Lonoff said, bidding adieu to Amy: “The end is so immense, it is its own poetry. It requires little rhetoric. Just state it plainly.” In *Exit Ghost*, as in *Everyman*, Roth has made a mas-

terpiece by following this injunction. So smart of him to make it up.

Patrick Allington, *The Advertiser [Australia]*, October 6, 2007

Exit Ghost is the curtain call for Nathan Zuckerman, a famous Jewish-American author who has now narrated nine of Roth’s books – provoking widespread and usually beside-the-point debate over the extent to which Zuckerman is Roth.

Very occasionally in *Exit Ghost* there is a sense that Roth is squeezing the Zuckerman franchise dry. More often, though, he conjures with telling effect a portrait of an old man whose glory days have long passed, replaced by a feebleness he can’t quite accept or grasp.

Sarah Churchwell, *The Guardian [London]*, October 6, 2007

The Ghost Writer is both elegant and explosive, a small masterpiece about origins and originality, riffing on Henry James’s story “The Middle Years” in order to meditate on the price that art exacts from life. Set almost 50 years later, *Exit Ghost* reverses all of these arcs: it is a story of dead ends, riffing on James’s story *The Aspern Papers* in order to meditate on the price that life extracts from art...

Despite the extreme contrivance of the situation, it is rich with tragicomic possibilities. Unfortunately, Roth abandons most of them in favour of a series of vacuous fantasy dialogues between Zuckerman and Jamie that certainly suggest Zuckerman is losing his gift, if not his grip. Narrative cul-de-sacs are everywhere, culminating in a seven-page discursion on George Plimpton’s funeral. As a set-piece, it is wonderful; as the novel’s climax, it is maddening.

Roth has always disdained linearity: his novels are geometric, polymorphous in more than just their perversity, and far be it from me to demand a more conventional book from this dizzying mind. But digressions, however amusing, cannot substitute for payoff. The provocative ideas Roth toys with – memory, mastery, ownership, ethics, aesthetics, fact, fiction, desire – just peter out.

Mind you, this is most likely a deliberate joke on Roth’s part – denouement as detumescence, a novel that withers on the vine just like his protagonist’s late,

Kasia Boddy, *The Daily Telegraph* [London], September 29, 2007

It is tempting to read *Exit Ghost* as an example of what Edward Said called late style. Lateness, he said, was not about tidying up but “intransigence, difficulty and unresolved contradiction.” But whether imagining counterlives [to adopt the title of Roth’s 1986 novel] or counterpunches [as he did in *The Human Stain*], Zuckerman has thrived on what he likes to call antagonism and often dramatises as boxing. There have been many fights over the years, life versus work and life versus death being the biggest. Zuckerman’s trip to New York is clearly his last round.

But there is one more battle to engage in: the “second death” of biography versus the limited immortality of literature. This is a book about the importance of literature that lasts. More critical than any piece of plot is Zuckerman’s re-reading of the authors he “discovered as a student”. Conrad provides the idea of the “rash moment,” T S Eliot the “compound ghost,” Keats “posthumous existence” before death. Then come Shakespeare, Melville, Hawthorne, Faulk-

ner, Hemingway, Plimpton, Mailer, Bellow, and, above all, himself and his fictional mentor, I E Lonoff.

Sebastian Faulks, *The Sunday Telegraph* [London], September 30, 2007

Prostate cancer might have been invented for the protagonists of Philip Roth’s late books. Death, impotence and nappies are the familiars of this ailment, the scourge of the ageing male. But there is always the chance of surviving; and while there is life, there is rage.

After a decade of exile in the countryside, Nathan Zuckerman returns to New York City for – what other reason could there be? – an operation.

As John Updike is the laureate of American manufacturing, so Philip Roth is the poet of the surgical glove, the threnodist of the hospital procedure. Nothing is extenuated, but almost everything is set down in anger. Zuckerman’s bladder leaks and he is impotent; the hospital may improve the first condition but can do nothing for the second.

Such is the life-force of the old boy, however, that he finds himself still tormented by desire.

Bibliographic Update (Continued from page 14)

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The Philip Roth Society Newsletter

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