



The Philip Roth Society Newsletter

Vol. 1 No. 2

Spring 2003

A Message From the Society's Founder

Derek Parker Royal

These are exciting times for Philip Roth studies. Not only has the writer garnered, even encouraged, increased media attention, but critics of his work promise to reinvigorate the field in the months to come.

Immediately before the 2002 Nobel Prizes were awarded—a prize for which he still remains a strong contender—Roth raised a few eyebrows concerning the tragedy of September 11. In an interview with the French newspaper, *Le Figaro*, he challenged the oft-repeated notion that on that date the United States lost its innocence—citing slavery, segregation, and McCarthyism as historical instances to the contrary—and argues that since the terrorist attacks America has engaged in an “orgy of national narcissism” in its subsequent patriotic fervor. Surprisingly, this drew little attention here in the U.S. If Lexis Nexis is any indication, the incident got more press in Canada and Europe than it did in this country. Although such comments were not enough to endear him to the Swedish

Academy last time around, it certainly wasn't a liability when it came to other awards. In November he won two prizes, France's Medicis foreign book prize for *The Human Stain* and the prestigious National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. I'm sure there will be even more buzz surrounding his chances at a Nobel Prize this year. Keep your eyes on the literary pundits of the foreign press for future developments.

Roth was even more visible this past March. In a rare televised interview (he gave one in 1966 on National Education Television) he spoke with David Remnick on BBC4. Most of their discussion revolved around the three novels in his American Trilogy. And popular media focus on those novels will only increase in the months to come. This winter Miramax Films will release their cinematic version of *The Human Stain*, directed by Robert Benton and starring Academy Award winners Anthony Hopkins and Nicole Kidman,

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About the Philip Roth Society

Founded in July 2002, the Philip Roth Society is an organization devoted to the study and the appreciation of the writings of Philip Roth. Its goal is to encourage the exchange of ideas and texts concerning this most significant author through discussions, panel presentations at scholarly conferences, and journal publications. In order to accomplish this, the Society provides a membership newsletter, information concerning upcoming events, calls for papers devoted to Roth's fiction, ongoing sponsorship of scholarly conference panels, an extensive list of bibliographical resources, a society listserv group, and a growing directory of organizational membership. The Society welcomes both academic and non-academic readers alike. The Philip Roth Society is a non-profit community of readers and scholars and has no official affiliation with either Philip Roth or his publishers.

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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 newsletter welcomes announcements of upcoming events and conferences, short articles and reviews (500 to 800 words) on topics related to Philip Roth. Disks in Word or email submissions are appreciated. Please address inquiries and send contributions to Derek Parker Royal, editor, *Philip Roth Society Newsletter*, Dept. of Literature & Languages, Texas A&M University-Commerce, Commerce, TX, 75429. email to: royal@rothsociety.org

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Philip Roth Society Web page:
<http://rothsociety.org>

**Conferences and Events**

To publicize a call for papers, lecture, or general event related to Philip Roth, contact the Philip Roth Society at events@rothsociety.org. When deadlines expire in calls for papers, the event will be listed as an “upcoming event.”

Upcoming Events**American Literature Association Annual Conference
Cambridge, MA (May 22-25, 2003)**

The Philip Roth Society will be sponsoring two panels at the 2003 ALA Conference: “The Textual (Counter)Worlds of Philip Roth” and “Figuring America in Philip Roth's Recent Fiction.” For more information on these panels visit the ALA Web site at <http://www.calstatela.edu/academic/english/ala2/>, or email the Philip Roth Society at events@rothsociety.org.

**American Literature Association Annual Conference
Cambridge, MA (May 22-25, 2003)**

The Philip Roth Society will hold its first business meeting at the 2003 ALA Conference in Cambridge, MA. All members of the Society, as well as prospective members, are encouraged to attend. At this meeting members will discuss the election of officers and the establishment of a constitution. If you are a member of the Roth Society, yet are unable to attend, please contact the society at events@rothsociety.org if you have any issues that you would like brought up at the business meeting.

**Modern Language Association Annual Convention
San Diego, CA (December 27-30, 2003)**

A special session panel, “Philip Roth and Race,” will present a first-of-its-kind approach to Roth's literature. Rather than studying what Roth thinks about identity issues—or what critics and cultural groups think about what Roth thinks—the papers in the panel will consider how Roth draws from and participates in a discourse on race in America. For more information, please contact the session coordinator, Dean Frano at francodj@wfu.edu.



Calls for Papers

American Literature Association - Jewish American and Holocaust Literature Conference Boca Raton, FL (October 22-26, 2003)

The Philip Roth Society is looking to contribute two distinct panels to the 2003 ALA-JAHL Conference in Boca Raton:

PANEL 1: Along with the Bernard Malamud Society, the Roth Society is looking for papers devoted to Roth and Malamud as writers, possibly including the literary relationship between the two. Topic is open.

PANEL 2: Papers concerning the writings of Philip Roth. Topic is open.

If you are interested in presenting a paper at either one of these panels, please email a 250-350 word abstract by June 27, 2003. For more information on the Philip Roth Society, please visit its web site at <http://rothsociety.org>. For more information regarding the Bernard Malamud Society, please email eavery@towson.edu.

Special issue of *Studies in American Jewish Literature* devoted to Philip Roth's America

I am seeking critical essays devoted to Philip Roth's recent exploration of American life in the last half of the 20th-century. This American Trilogy, as it has been called by his publisher, includes the novels *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, and *The Human Stain*. Consideration may also be given to essays focusing on his other later works, such as *Sabbath's Theater* and *The Dying Animal*, but ONLY as they relate to Roth's recent socio-historical articulation of American identity. Topics for consideration might include:

- ◆ Roth's perspective on 1960s radicalism and its legacy
- ◆ The question over Roth's "conservatism" in *American Pastoral*
- ◆ Identity politics within post-WW II America
- ◆ McCarthyism and political correctness
- ◆ Fictions of dissent
- ◆ America at the end of the millennium
- ◆ The (narrative) construction of an American identity, especially as it relates to ethnoracial issues
- ◆ Roth's critique of American exceptionalism, the American dream, self-reliance, and "the pastoral"
- ◆ Political theory and the role of literature
- ◆ Roth's place as a chronicler of contemporary American life

Essays should be approximately 5000 words, received by 15 August 2003, and can be either emailed (as an attached Word file) or snail mailed to the Roth Society. For more information, email Derek P. Royal at royal@rothsociety.org. This special issue is slotted for the 2004 annual issue of SAJL (vol. 23).

Book collection of essays devoted to Philip Roth as a comic writer

We are looking for essays that specifically deal with Philip Roth as a comic writer. The "comic" here can be approached as ironic, satiric, wry, burlesque, mockery, etc. Contributions can deal with a general comic theme and preferably focus on a specific work or works. All contributions should be formatted using the latest edition of the Chicago Manual of Style.

For more information concerning this project, especially in terms of potential contributions, please contact either Ben Siegel at BSiegel@CSUPomona.edu or Jay L. Halio at jlhalio@yahoo.com

Abstracts from papers delivered at recent conferences

American Literature Association - Jewish American & Holocaust Literature Conference, Boca Raton, FL, October 23-26, 2003.

Session: Philip Roth's *The Dying Animal*

Moderator: Derek Parker Royal, Prairie View A&M University

Ellen Gerstle, Farleigh Dickinson University

The Dying Animal: The Art of Obsessing or Obsessing about Art

The Dying Animal, the third novel of another trilogy by Philip Roth, has generated irritation rather than praise by some critics who previously lauded other recent works. These analyses make some thought-provoking assessments but they also resonate with stale complaints of Roth's misogyny and pruriency. Arguably the slender novelette may not achieve the power of his award-winning books, but the writing deals effectively with a complex of themes that have been central to Roth's oeuvre. Seemingly a prototypical Freudian man, David Kepesh, like Alexander Portnoy and Mickey Sabbath, gravitates toward sexual love as the natural path to follow for gaining the greatest satisfaction. Freud's observations aside, Kepesh and his literary cohorts regard unbounded sexual exploration as the physical correlative of that quintessential AMERICAN value-freedom. But breaking sexual taboos does not release any one of them from his psychological chains. In Roth's books sexual acts and sexual language that could be labeled pornographic have frequently discomfited both professional critics and general readers who reject Roth's appropriation of sex as a vehicle to explore other themes. This paper reviews Roth's use of strong sexual content in *The Dying Animal* in order to provide an alternate appraisal to the negative critiques, demonstrating Roth's interest in the relationship between the quintessential American value-freedom-and the artist's ability to express his ideas.



Ellen Gerstle in Boca Raton, Fla



Aimee Pozorski in Boca Raton, Fla.

Aimee L. Pozorski, Emory University

Transnational Trauma and “the mockery of Armageddon”:

The Dying Animal in the New Millennium

Trauma theory—exemplified by Sigmund Freud and Cathy Caruth—focuses on skewed temporality: traumatic experience compels survivors to return perpetually to the missed event in order to recover an experience which came too soon and without preparation. As a result, the survivor returns to the moment of the incident to master that which was initially unprepared for. The intense media speculation and the preparatory actions of the world at the turn of the millennium revealed a collective fantasy that Armageddon could allow the world finally to prepare for traumatic experience never fully processed during the second World War. Paradoxically, the disaster at the new millennium seemed cleansing, even reparative. However, (to use the words of Philip Roth) “Armageddon mocked the world,” providing it with no second chance to realign the unimaginable events of the 20th century. As Roth demonstrates in *The Dying Animal*, the worldwide mayhem broadcast at the turn of the millennium might be our best lesson for thinking beyond our national borders, indicating that the trauma of the last cen-

ture was neither personal nor isolated, but rather collective and transnational. With an uncanny prediction of 2001's bin Laden events, Roth links personal tragedy and public hysteria in the single event of the millennial New Year's Eve celebration: one moment in time joining the world in both its paranoia and preparation for anticipated world devastation.

Session: Postmodern Impulses in the Works of Philip Roth

Moderator: Ranen Omer-Sherman

Derek Parker Royal, Prairie View A&M University Framing the Ethnic Subject in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*

Most of Philip Roth's novels are concerned with the symbiotic relationship between experience and the narrative, or, to quote Nathan Zuckerman in *The Counterlife*, "the kind of stories people turn life into, the kind of lives that people turn stories into." *The Human Stain* continues this fictional trajectory. In it, Roth returns—with a vengeance—to the theme of narrated lives. The story of Coleman Silk is arguably the best crafted and the most ambitious work in the American Trilogy. Its structure is similar to that of *American Pastoral* in that in both, Zuckerman not only presents the tragic tale of a uniquely memorable figure, but his disclosures give readers a glimpse into the assumptions and privileges that comprise storytelling. While many critics have read Zuckerman as merely the writerly conduit through which Silk's story unfolds, they nonetheless work from the assumption that the story of Coleman Silk, as presented by Zuckerman, is more or less true. Or, put another way, they assume that as a historian of Silk's life, Zuckerman is a reliable narrator and compiler of facts, and that his narrative efforts (plot) correspond to the actual events (story). This paper argues that, to the contrary, Zuckerman's narrative in *The Human Stain* problematizes any "reliable" interpretation in that it reflects a postmodern reading of ethnic identities and the ways in which such identities are constructed.



Derek Royal in Boca Raton, Fla.

Ranen Omer-Sherman, University of Miami The Writer and the Problem of Literary Piety

As is well known among aficionados of literary scandals, for the sins of *Portnoy's Complaint* as well as the short stories eventually collected in *Goodbye, Columbus*, Philip Roth attracted a number of dismayed detractors. Chief among these was Marie Syrkin, who, along with establishment figures such as Irving Howe, Ruth Wisse, Hillel Halkin and even Gershom Scholem, exemplifies the influence of piety in Jewish criticism. Many defensive Jewish readers stopped reading Roth after *Portnoy*, unable to view the novel as anything but a social document, insider testimony that would "prove" the authenticity of the most extreme antisemitic claims. As Roth's critical and popular success grew, an indignant Syrkin felt compelled to minimize the damage by taking the issue back into the comparatively domestic enclave of Jewish debate, surrounding the controversial novelist with the familial inquisition of the Jewish establishment. Not only was Roth's "Jewboy" struggling with a doppelgänger—a "nice Jewish boy"—but in assigning a pariah status to Portnoy, he was wistfully bestowing on him an enduring condition of apartness, commensurate with the notion of a people that "dwells apart." Hence, Roth was—as his critics charged—indeed obsessed with the Jew as transgressor and defiler of the West, particularly the American Dream. He would return again and again, in fine form as David Kepesh, Mickey Sabbath, Merry Levov, and Iron Rinn—though this paper demonstrates that these pariah figures signify Roth's loyalty, not hostility, to the idea of Jewish difference.

Alexis Kate Wilson, University of Maryland
The Travels of the American *Talush*



Ranen Omer-Sherman, left, and Alexis Wilson in Boca Raton, Fla.

In Philip Roth's *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock*, an American Jew traveling outside of the United States becomes part of an experiment in possible worlds. In doing so, Roth invokes the language of the modernist tropes of the Jewish outsider in British and American literature, the *luftmensch* of Yiddish literature, the “underground man,” and the *talush* of modern Hebrew literature. This paper explores the ways in which Roth alters the *talush* (literally “uprooted”) for a postmodern world. In particular, it contrasts the Eastern European depressive wanderer with the American *talush* whose uprooting becomes an opportunity for imagining new worlds and for self-examination. Philip Roth's *talushot* become the playing ground for postmodern skepticism of an essential

self. In his 1966 article, “The Jew as Modern Writer,” Alfred Kazin argues that the Jew as the “symbol of exile” becomes the prototypical modern writer. As an outsider, he is enabled to be a commentator on American society. For Philip Roth, the American Jew traveling in Israel is the basis for investigating the central questions of the postmodern condition. The paper looks at why Roth chooses this scenario and explores the role of the Jewish writer in America and Israel today. It also poses the question: Is it now “The Jew as Post-Modern Mis-Writer”?

Session: Philip Roth, Then and Now

Moderator: Derek Parker Royal

Margaret Smith, Manchester Metropolitan University
Autobiography: False Confession?

This paper argues that Philip Roth does not write autobiography. Instead, he contrives his fiction to blur the boundaries of both “fiction” and “autobiography” as a narrative strategy in his own work. Consequently, when a protagonist called Philip Roth appears who happens to be a Jewish-American writer, it's all part of a narrative device. Further, the paper looks at how masks are made and, in particular, how Roth devises the concept of mask. This would seem to have a bearing on whether Roth has the ability to apply or remove the notion of mask, especially if what is at issue is autobiography. Roth has said, “using fragments of your life is exactly like putting pieces of beefsteak through a mincer to make a hamburger. The mincer is imagination[...]. The result is still meat but transformed, organized.” His quote seems to suggest that a mask can be self-consciously created as a means of preventing the imaginative transformation of so-called “real life” as in autobiography. Roth himself has argued that the mask of the first person singular may be the best mask of all for the “second self.” This suggests that the writer, through the production of autobiography is, in Roth's own words, “most himself by simultaneously being someone else, present and absent at the same time”—a typical scenario in Roth's fiction.

David Cockley, Kent State University
An American Pastiche: Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*

American Pastoral sets up an interesting dichotomy surrounding authorial intent. First, one must break through the disguise that Roth employs to mask the figure of the author, namely Nathan Zuckerman, in order to discern where this “metafictional” strategy leads. Zuckerman nostalgically narrates the text in order to question the way society arrives at the postmodern moment. As this author figure approaches the end of his life, he searches for a metaphoric meaning that can provide answers to the problems that plague society and the new generation of Americans. The dichotomy surrounds the text's search: is Roth nostalgic for an idyllic America, or is he blaming the past for the problems of today? The simple title of the text leads one to believe that Zuckerman longs for a forgotten lifestyle. A traditional pastoral idealizes the past and presents an uncorrupted view of the way things were. However, the yearning for the past that exemplifies nostalgia disappears when the first person narration ends after the initial section of the text, and the authorial voice becomes clouded. As the author figure explores the lives of the Levov family in more depth, corrupt and ill-advised behaviors intrude on the nostalgic vision and turn the text into a postmodern pastiche of twentieth century American life. *American Pastoral* challenges a nostalgic past and presents a view of a society and a family that is a product of its own creation.

Jonna Mackin, Dartmouth College
Goodbye Schlemiel; You Can't Get Any Respect

This paper uses psychoanalytic theory to consider how comedy manipulates ethnic identity. It considers the Jewish-American subject in Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*, based on the traditional Jewish fool or the schlemiel, a blundering clown. The specific cultural and historical contexts in which he writes demands that this stock comic type be used in a new way. But Roth withdraws from identifying with this archetypal Jewish fool. The paper argues that this refusal of identification disentangles the Jew from a cultural nexus of self-deprecating “Jewish humor,” replacing the figure of the “ghetto Jew” in Freud's theories about humor. The discursive strategy of the comic produces an ethnic identification that is provisional and contingent, capable of changing subject to object and back again in joking material. Their comedy disallows the totalizing figuration which also becomes the scapegoat. By promoting a multiplicity of identities, it rejects any single version of Jewishness and makes us ask what we mean by “ethnic.”



Jonna Mackin, left, and David Cockley in Boca Raton, Fla.

Session: American Jews in Literature and Film = Popular Culture
Harris O. Daniels, Clark University
The Adaptation of the Jews: The “Jewish Problem” in American Literature, Hollywood Film, and Popular Culture, vis a vis Philip Roth's Goodbye, Columbus

This paper examines Larry Peerce's 1969 cinematic adaptation of Philip Roth's novella, “Goodbye, Columbus” and its lack of effectiveness as a proper treatment of a particularly “Jewish” text. As a companion to this paper its author also presented a short film based on Roth's short story, “The Conversion of the Jews,” a project that he directed, shot, and edited.

**Modern Language Association Convention
New York, NY December 27-30, 2002**
Philip Roth as Comic Writer (arranged by American Humor Studies Association)

Moderator: Ben Siegel, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona

Sandor Goodhart, Purdue University
A Fiddler of the Roof: Soul Battering and Violence in “Conversion of the Jews”

Abstract unavailable.

Judith Yaross Lee, Ohio University
Affairs of the Breast: Philip Roth and David Kepesh

Affairs of the breast stand in contrast to affairs of the heart as an approach to the comic components of Roth's David Kepesh trilogy. Most commentary on these novels concentrates on their grand themes—reality and control over one's life (*The Breast*), the erotic as a literary subject (*The Professor of Desire*), the pull between sex and death (*The Dying Animal*)—but what ties these three books together is the character of narrator David Kepesh and his serial lusts. His absorption with his body, as the essence of the self, explains why the texts that he produces concentrate on his own life, and parallels between his own life and literary works, than on literary works themselves. Which is to say that Kepesh is a model literature professor for someone who doesn't much like lit professors: he represents an inversion of the sacred laws of literary study, especially the tenet that the study of great literature confers great humanity on its acolytes. Given these character traits, it's not surprising that Kepesh turns into a giant breast. He's a boob from the start. But in the end, as he nears the end of life as Roth imagines it at the end of *The Dying Animal*, Kepesh understands the link between lust and love and finally becomes something of a mensch.



Judith Yaross Lee at MLA in New York.

Jay L. Halio, University of Delaware
Deadly Farce: Philip Roth's *The Anatomy Lesson*

Throughout his oeuvre, Philip Roth has used a specific form of comedy that is best termed “deadly farce.” It combines the elements of farce with often tragic aspects, or at other times aspects that relate directly to death and dying. An excellent example of Roth's extended use of deadly farce is in *The Anatomy Lesson*, where Zuckerman



Jay Halio, left, and Ben Siegel at MLA in New York.

is afflicted with an unnamed and undiagnosed illness that has rendered him all but helpless with pain. A number of episodes involve his four helpers, woman who minister to him in various ways, including sexual acts. The most farcical episodes, however, concern his impersonation of Milton Appel, who he says is the editor of *Lickety Split*, a porn magazine. This is in retribution to the critic who has panned his work (as Irving Howe did Roth's) after first praising his earlier work. The novel ends with Zuckerman in the hospital with a broken jaw, got by stumbling on a tombstone while chasing an old man through a cemetery. Recovering in a hospital, he follows the doctors around the wards as he treats people with far more serious, deadly illnesses.

Elaine B. Safer, University of Delaware

History as Tragic and Comic in Roth's Trilogy: *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, and *The Human Stain*

Karl Marx wrote that history repeats itself "once as tragedy, and again as farce." These two elements are evident in Philip Roth's trilogy, *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist* and *The Human Stain*. Roth's greatness as an artist in no small measure is shown by the ease with which he is able to intertwine these strands, by the degree to which they interact and by the way they throw light on one another. Indeed, often they can only be understood in terms of each other. Roth's early novels, as well as the postmodern novels that precede *Sabbath's Theater*, have an overall tone that is reckless and comic. But in his American Trilogy the tone is much darker. This paper focuses on scenes from each member of the trilogy (e.g., Seymour Levov, Eve Frame, Coleman Silk, and Delphine Roux) to show how Roth looks back on history-not first as tragic and later as comic but in the black humor manner that intertwines the two. Typically Roth uses humorous and grotesque situations as building blocks to develop tragedy. The mingling of comic and tragic tones, as well as Roth's setting up opposing arguments that seem equally true, is what gives the trilogy and, in fact, all Roth's novels their great power.



Elaine Safer at MLA in New York.

Hawaii International Conference On Arts & Humanities Honolulu, Hawaii January 12- 15, 2003

Session: Various Areas of Arts and Humanities

G. Neelakantan, Indian Institute of Technology Philip Roth's Apocalypse in *American Pastoral*

Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* depicts an apocalyptic world that is much in need of redemption. This vision arises out of contemplating the fortunes of Swede Levov who is completely overtaken by the socio-cultural developments of the American sixties. Initially viewing Levov as a platitude, Zuckerman is later convinced that Levov was a genuine human being who believed in the American Dream. In unraveling the tragic story of Levov,

Zuckerman allegorically examines the vicissitudes that have called the American Dream into question. The youthful idealism of Levov, a John F. Kennedy figure, that evolves from the immigrant belief that America is a land of possibilities, finds itself jolted when his daughter Merry, an antiwar ideologue, turns first into a terrorist and later goes into denial in becoming a staunch Jainist. What makes one wonder is Roth's conflation of the souring of the American Dream with the developments of the sixties. Such a characterization is almost reminiscent of the neo-conservative take of a la Saul Bellow or even Allan Bloom. Tracing the death of American culture to the vanishing family structure, Roth's apocalyptic vision is driven by his proverbial misogyny. Despite this stereotyping, Roth succeeds in presenting with verve the tragic story of Levov's loss of his pastoral in the cataclysmic upheaval of the sixties.

Southwest/Texas Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association Albuquerque, NM February 12-15, 2003

Session: Humor

Sam Coale, Wheaton College

Jerkin' the Gherkin: Philip Roth's Hands-On Humor

A new voice appeared in American fiction in 1969—Philip Roth's, not the maddened liver's—complete with its sexually outrageous and provocative acts, its confessional directness, and its comic incongruities. The masturbatory monologue that became *Portnoy's Complaint* involved both self-definition and self-abuse, each of which seemed to mirror the other. What charged Roth's prose, however, was his exacerbated sense of discontent, his over-the-top soliloquies of complaint, themselves icons of scatological humor. The claustrophobic and self-enclosed nature of such male-driven orations, however, suggests nothing so much as a kind of mental masturbation overtaking its physical counterpart. Such monologues inevitably clash with others, producing the confrontations of Roth's later dialogical novels and creating the postmodern vision in his later work, which resists closure while mining the psychic depths of various shocks of recognition and regret. Since the 1990s Roth's masturbatory melodies have continued as has the humor, but now both are played out on a larger political and cultural canvas. Nathan Zuckerman, made impotent because of a prostate operation, is now spanking the signifying monkey rather than the monkey itself, still versed in sexual outrage and worldly antagonisms, but seeing them from a wiser, fuller, perhaps less visceral perspective, not so much complaining about himself but communing and commiserating compassionately with others, often, as Coleman Silk, “blindsided by the terrifyingly provisional nature of everything.”

Northeast Modern Language Association Convention Boston, MA March 6-9, 2003

Roth's Recent Fiction (two panels)

Chair: (panel 1) Matthew Wilson, Capital College - Penn State, Harrisburg

(panel 2) Charles Mitchell, Elmira College

Dean Franco, Wake Forest University

Philip Roth's Jewish Drag

Philip Roth's literature, especially *The Human Stain*, actively deconstructs the very idea of racial classification, by pitting competing models of race against each other; by parodying the idea of racial “essence”; and by skew-

ering the logic that inheres in racism and anti-Semitism. But this last point is pivotal: Roth shows us that in our contemporary society, we come into social being as and against racial types. Race, then, is both awful and unavoidable. This paper has three major sections, examining the status of blackness, the status of Jewishness, and then implications for characters who negotiate margins of each identity. The paper argues that the tension of the novel comes from desire of characters to live solely as individuals on the one hand, and the social demands for racial classification on the other hand. The tension is most obviously at work in Coleman Silk's entanglement with the politics of racial identification. It is echoed by the backdrop of the Clinton administration. The "don't ask don't tell" president who championed private identity is the same man who nominated Lani Guinier—who emphasized public identities based on race and/or group interest—to be Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights. Finally, the paper argues it is this same tension between the desire for secrets and the demand for classification that makes the novel's final scene with Zuckerman and Les Farley so dangerous.

Matthew Wilson, Capital College - Penn State, Harrisburg
***The Human Stain* and the Genre of the Passing Novel**

Even though exactly one hundred years separate Philip Roth's passing novel, *The Human Stain*, from Charles W. Chesnutt's passing novel, *The House Behind the Cedars*, there are surprising continuities between two novels. In fact, reading the passing narrative of *The Human Stain* in the light of Chesnutt forces one to see how little has changed the American racial imaginary in the last hundred years. This paper is a mediation on Roth's *The Human Stain* using the writing of Chesnutt as a way of exploring the genre of passing novel, and of exploring the persistence of racial essentialism in American thinking and the responses to that essentialism. The paper compares Coleman Silk to a number of Chesnutt's characters, in particular John Warwick (Walden) from *The House Behind the Cedars* and to Donald Glover, the main character of Chesnutt's recently published novel, *The Quarry*. While this paper examines the desire of Warwick (Walden) and Silk to escape and to remake themselves and their desire to opt out of history, it uses the character of Glover as a way of arguing the inescapability of race and the color line in America both in the early 20th and early 21st centuries.

Jeffrey Charis-Carlson, University of Iowa
"It's the government all over again": Washington D.C. as a Portable National Capital in Roth's American Trilogy

While Philip Roth has often invoked the presence of Washington, D.C., within his earlier novels and satires, his recent American Trilogy more closely examines it as a site for exploring crossroads between the individual and the State, between the literary and the political, as well as between a particularized Jewish identity and a universalized American identity. This paper explores how Roth's trilogy invokes the capital, not as a fixed point, but as a portable national center that directly links the national/local crossroads to the various layers of narration

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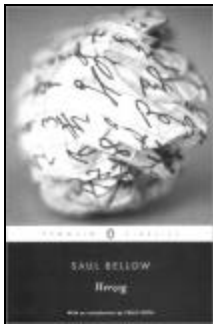
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through which Roth creates his distinctive *mise en abîme*. In *American Pastoral*, this relationship appears both in Merry Levov's blowing up the local postal station and in the broadcast of the Watergate hearings into the Florida home of Swede Levov's parents. In *I Married a Communist*, the tentacle-like reach of the national capital functions in the presence of Congressman/Gossip-Columnist Grant's witch hunt proceedings. And in *The Human Stain* Roth most overtly analyzes these crossroads not only as the transition sites between the local and the national, but also between the isolated author and the engaged citizen. By linking the political/literary crossroads to the story's blurred layers of narration, Roth develops a new vantage point for mediating the relationship between politics and literature. His novels avoid becoming mere allegorical romans à clefs because they explore why his readers invite such representations of lived experiences into their hometowns, into their living rooms, and into their intimate thoughts.

Of Note...



In February 2003 Penguin released its reprint of Saul Bellow's classic, *Herzog*, with Philip Roth contributing the introduction. Roth's piece is an abbreviated version of his 2000 *New Yorker* essay, "Rereading Saul Bellow," also collected in *Shop Talk: A Writer and His Colleagues and Their Work*.

More than one reviewer has noted the similarities between Philip Roth and the title character in Alan Lelchuck's 2003 novel, *Ziff: A Life?* It's the story of a fading novelist, Danny Levitan (a stand-in for Lelchuck?), who takes on the impossible task of writing a tell-all biography of the charismatic and critically-acclaimed author, Arthur Ziff. At one point in this roman à clef (?), Levitan/Lelchuck describes the controversial author of such books as *The Carnal Confessions of Rabbi Shmuel Siegel* and *A Countermemoir* in this manner:



Alan Lelchuck
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From early social and psychological realism to performances of wild, raucous humor, and recent forays into the wide-open territory of postmodern elusiveness, Ziff has shown an uncanny ability to traverse closed boundaries and leave readers gasping. Just when you think you have his direction mapped and tracked, he zigzags away, laughing mockingly at your naïveté. He knows how to feint, to bob and weave, to counterpunch, and then to vanish; he is a literary Willie Pep, or to shift metaphors, a Houdini, escaping from every room of sealed-off interpretation. (96-97)

Readers familiar with both Lelchuck and Roth may draw their own conclusions.

Bibliographical Update

For a complete listing of bibliographical resources, go to the Roth Society Web site <http://rothsociety.org>

Primary Sources

Roth, Philip. "Philip Roth at 70." Interview with David Remnick. BBC4. London. 19 March 2003.

A televised interview of approximately 50 minutes with the editor of *The New Yorker* concerning primarily the three novels in the American Trilogy. Brief excerpts from the interview can be found in the 16 March 2003 edition of London's *Sunday Telegraph*.

Secondary Sources

Book Chapters

Hungerford, Amy. "Bellow, Roth, and the Secret of Identity." *The Holocaust of Texts: Genocide, Literature, and Personification*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003. 122-51. In her study of Holocaust texts, Hungerford examines how both Saul Bellow and Philip Roth mediate the social forces of representation in order to create a space for individual freedom. For her readings on Roth, she looks at the ways in which Holocaust history and family history help establish narrative identity in *The Ghost Writer* and *The Human Stain*.

Kaufmann, David. "Harold's Complaint, or Assimilation in Full Bloom." *British Romanticism and the Jews: History, Culture, Literature*. New York: Palgrave, 2002. 249-63. Kaufmann explores the waning theoretical significance of Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* by comparing it to the anxieties and compulsions found in *Portnoy's Complaint*. He argues that both are Freudian investigations into the dynamics of Jewish assimilation.

Kermode, Frank. "Philip Roth." *Pleasing Myself: From Beowulf to Philip Roth*. London: Allen Lane, 2001. 256-65. Reprint of a review from the *New York Review of Books* (16 November 1995). Kermode focuses on the outrageousness of *Sabbath's Theater* and pronounces it the most wickedly energetic novels since *Portnoy's Complaint*.

Lodge, David. "Sick with Desire: Philip Roth's Libertine Professor." *Consciousness and the Novel: Collected Essays*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002.

248-67. Reprint of a review from the *New York Review of Books* (5 July 2001). Calling the novel a "disturbing masterpiece," Lodge examines *The Dying Animal* in terms of its powerful challenge to contemporary social morality.

Rodgers, Bernard F., Jr. "The Ghost Writer: Philip Roth." *Voices and Visions: Selected Essays*. Lanham, MD: UP of America, 2001. 35-65. Brief reviews (mostly summaries) of the novels and epilogue in *Zuckerman Bound*, *The Counterlife*, the autobiographical tetralogy, and *American Patoral*. Parts of this chapter were originally published in the *Chicago Tribune Book World*, *Magill's Literary Annual*, *Masterplots II: American Fiction Series*, and *The World and I*.

Substantial Sections of Book Chapters

Dickstein, Morris. "Apocalypse Now: A Literature of Extremes." *Leopards in the Temple: The Transformation of American Fiction 1945-1970*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002. 142-228. As part of his study of post-war American fiction, Dickstein looks at the literary significance of Philip Roth. Most of this section is devoted to his discussion of *Portnoy's Complaint* and the narratives in *Goodbye, Columbus and Other Stories*, but he also makes reference to later works, specifically *My Life As a Man* and *Sabbath's Theater*.

Sorin, Gerald. "Retrospection and Celebration." *Irving Howe: A Life of Passionate Dissent*. New York: New York UP, 2002. 246-72. In this biography, Sorin devotes several pages to Howe's reaction to *Portnoy's Complaint*. He argues that because of his own immersion in *Yiddishkayt* during the early 1970s, Howe unjustly dismissed Roth's controversial novel and failed to see its engagement with American Jewish identity.

Journal Essays

Patai, Daphne. "Academic Affairs." Rev. of *The Human Stain*, by Philip Roth, *The Dying Animal*, by Philip Roth, *The Professor of Desire*, by Philip Roth,

Old Scores, by Nicholas Delbanco, *Blue Angel*, by Francine Prose, and *The Man Who Wrote the Book*, by Eric Tarloff. *Sexuality and Culture* 6.2 (2002): 65-96. Review essay on novelistic representations of sexual relations on campus. Patai sees Roth's novels as challenging the simplistic readings of "asymmetrical relationships" so much a part of contemporary campus speech and behavior codes.

Dissertations

Cappell, Ezra. "New Directions in Jewish American Fiction." Diss. New York U, 2002.

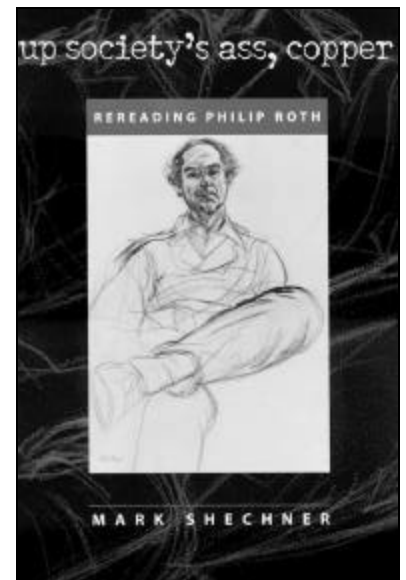
Founder's Message - continued from page 1

as well as Ed Harris and Gary Sinise (who will play Nathan Zuckerman). What is more, Lakeshore Entertainment (the company that bought the rights to *The Human Stain*) has also recently acquired the rights to both *The Dying Animal* and *American Pastoral*. After the 1972 fiasco of Ernest Lehman's adaptation of *Portnoy's Complaint*, might we be in for a mini-renaissance in Roth-inspired films?

On the scholarly front, interest in Philip Roth studies continues to bloom...literally. This summer Chelsea House will publish a new edition on Roth for Harold Bloom's Modern Critical Views series (in June) as well as a new text on *Portnoy's Complaint* for Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretation series (in July). Later this fall the University of Wisconsin Press will publish Mark Shechner's new book, *Up Society's Ass, Copper: Rereading Philip Roth*, and the Presses universitaires de Montpellier, France, will bring out Paule Lévy and Ada Savin's bilingual collection of essays on Roth. The latter will include contributions from such renowned scholars as Robert Alter, Daniel Walden, Jay L. Halio, and André Bleikasten.

What all of this means for the Philip Roth Society is that not only do we have a lot to look forward to; but such increased exposure can provide us with more of an opportunity to grow. And in the past six months, the Roth Society has done just that. We have dramatically enlarged our membership, increased our participation at national literary conferences, and improved the ways in which the society functions. In October 2002 the Philip Roth Society sponsored three panels at the ALA-Jewish American and Holocaust Literature Conference in Boca Raton, FL (see the section that follows for abstracts of these papers as well as others presented at various conferences in the past six months), and this year at the annual American Literature Association Conference in Cambridge, MA, we're holding two panels-worth of impressive papers (see the "Conferences and Events" section). Also at the Cambridge ALA, we will hold our first business meeting. During this time we will elect officers and discuss the adoption of a society constitution. In addition to this, Aimee L. Pozorski, a Roth Society member at Emory University, is helping to set up a listserv group for the society. This should provide a wonderful opportunity to exchange ideas and generate discussion among all society members.

We are at a fruitfully critical point in the Philip Roth Society. I look forward to our continued growth and the ever-increasing support from fellow members. I encourage everyone to help in membership recruitment, take part in society-sponsored functions, and contribute to this newsletter. Six months from now, who knows what accomplishments we might list in these pages?



Membership Information

To become a member of The Philip Roth Society, fill out this form and mail it to the address below. Annual membership fees are \$15 (\$20 for overseas addresses), which includes subscription to the *Philip Roth Society Newsletter*, and should be paid by check or money order (made out to "The Philip Roth Society"). To be listed in the directory of members on the Roth Society's Web site, please indicate so by checking the appropriate space(s) on the form.

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The Philip Roth Society Newsletter

In this issue:

Message from the Society's founder
Abstracts from recent conference papers
Recent Roth publications
Upcoming events and calls for papers

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