



The Philip Roth Society Newsletter

Vol. 5 No.1

Spring 2007

Message from the Society's President Derek Parker Royal

Message from the Society's President

The Philip Roth Society held its annual business meeting at the American Literature Association Conference in Boston on May 26. There all the officers delivered their annual reports (the minutes of which can be found in this issue of the *Newsletter*). Of particular note was the fact that the membership numbers in the organization are lower than they have been over the past couple of years. There may be any number of reasons for this drop, but part of it is due to the lack of membership renewals. Those present at the business meeting speculated that current and past members may intend to renew, but just forget to do so. What is more, potential new members may be unaware that participation in Philip Roth Society-sponsored panels at conferences is contingent upon membership in the society. There is a need here to begin strictly enforce this policy when it comes to all future events. These are matters that the officers will address in the coming months.

Also discussed at the business meeting other im-

portant issues: the cost of membership within the society and its possible links to the peer-reviewed journal, *Philip Roth Studies*. Some at the meeting felt that we needed to increase our membership fees, and in doing so should make subscription to the journal part of the membership package. (As things stand now, subscription costs to *Philip Roth Studies* are separate from membership costs, although all members of the society currently get a 20% discount on the journal. Subscription to the *Philip Roth Society Newsletter* automatically comes with society membership.) Others suggested that we create a two-option membership system: one membership option without journal subscription and the other option, the more costly one, including journal subscription. Much of this will depend on what the society is able to work out with Heldref, the publisher of *Philip Roth Studies*. Soon I will be contacting all Roth Society members via email to get their input on these matters.

Another important matter we discussed at our annual business meeting was our plans for future con-

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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 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 a web page at <http://orgs.tamu-commerce.edu/rothsoc/society.htm>, 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 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. Disks in Word or email submissions appreciated. For submissions or queries, contact Joe Kraus, Editor, *The Philip Roth Society Newsletter*, Department of English, The University of Scranton, Scranton, PA 18510
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Calls for Papers

Twentieth-Century Literature and Culture Conference Louisville, KY (February 21 - 23, 2008)

The Philip Roth Society will sponsor a panel at the 2008 University of Louisville's Twentieth-Century Literature and Culture Conference. We are also interested in finding a panel moderator (who could also present a paper) for this panel. To submit, please email a 200-350 word abstract to Derek_Royal@tamu-commerce.edu. The deadline for submissions is September 7, 2007.

For more information on the Philip Roth Society, please visit its Website at <http://rothsociety.org>.

The Twentieth-Century Literature Conference, now in its thirty-fifth year, is an annual international conference notable for the breadth of interests that it represents and for the combination of critical and creative work that it features. For more information on the conference visit its Web site <http://modernlanguages.louisville.edu/conference/>.



Joel Salzberg at ALA, 2007

21st Century Roth: Call for Contributions to an Informal Exchange

For the Fall 2007 issue of *The Philip Roth Society Newsletter*, we seek contributions of 250-800 words that offer reactions to the term "21st Century Roth."

We are looking for informal reviews, notes, or essays that are informed by one or more of the contexts within which contemporary readers encounter Roth and his work. Tone can, and we hope will, vary from one contribution to another. We conceive of the contributions as neither the first nor the last word on the particular question they engage. Instead they are an opportunity to take part in a conversation among scholars and careful readers of Roth's work.

We have extended this call from our last issue and hope that we can encourage a casual, academic exchange on Roth's status as one of the preeminent writers of the new century.

For queries or submissions, please contact Joe Kraus at krausj2@scranton.edu. Deadline for contributions is November 15, 2007.

Abstracts from Papers Delivered at Recent Conferences

* denotes PRS member

Twentieth-Century Literature and Culture Conference – Louisville, KY, February 22-24, 2007

Panel: Narrating the Shylock and Shlemiel in Philip Roth's Fiction

Chair: Daniel Morris, Purdue University

Paper 1: "Philip Roth as an Organic Intellectual: A Reading of *Portnoy's Complaint*" – Zaid Mahir, University of Missouri-Columbia

Abstract: Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* is a religio/class-oriented novel, cast in the monologue form and proceeding as a journey of self-exploration, and it can also be read as a work of an "organic intellectual," as defined by Antonio Gramsci. In it, Roth has a particular frame-of-thought attacked, exposed, satirized, and challenged. The theme of guilt and punishment, dominating the essential Jewish experience, is scrutinized in the novel, with the aim of articulating dreams and aspirations long suppressed by religious institutions. Roth takes his character's complaint to a point of no return, where there can be no way out of historical predicament except by dismantling tradition to have a fresh start. To make this possible, Roth dramatizes the moral conflict Portnoy has and thus creates tension and polarity early in the novel. Further, to make Portnoy's dilemma representative of his class of Jews, he creates a similar though minor character, Heshie, whose failure to stand up for a stifled discourse of love and hope (as opposed to self-hatred and fear), however, justifies and counter-informs Portnoy's revolt against institutionalized tradition. By so doing, Roth makes a powerful statement on what it means to be a sensitive human being caught up in the middle of coercive discourse that thrives on continuity of tradition and suppression of individual voice. Roth's work recognizes the significance of subversion of narrow-minded dogma within a given community as a strategy towards a higher goal: reconstructing a collective conscious that realizes its own potential for change and for creating a state-of-mind open to communication and interaction with those outside of class. Roth's willful endeavour, combined with his intelligent mind, bespeak in this novel an organic intellectual in the cradle, forcing his way through a maze of contingencies. His subversive strategy has a humanist's touch: deconstruction-analysis-reconstruction. In this sense, his status as a cultural case establishes



From left, Zaid Mahir, Scott Branson, and Dan Morris at the Twentieth-century Literature and Culture Conference, 2007



Derek Royal, Ross Posnock, Aimee Pozorski, and James Bloom at the *Sabbath's Theater* Roundtable of the ALA, 2007

him, not only as an organic intellectual struggling against suppressive institutions, but also as a progressive one whose class-commitment does not blind him to the shortcomings of his class. His mission as a writer is thus twofold: free his class of historical predicament and then articulate their dreams. Or, better, break down the restraints and impediments to change, in order to make change possible.

*** Paper 2:** “The Case of Portnoy: How to Utter Silence” – Scott Branson, Emory University

Abstract: This paper analyzes the structure of Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint* in relation to the generic category of the psychoanalytic case

history. Traditionally, the psychoanalytic setting of the novel has led the reader or critic to take on the position of the analyst, who remains mostly silent throughout the text. However, this reading overlooks the rhetorical function that psychoanalytic language plays in structuring the text. Through its assumption of psychoanalytic discourse, I argue that Roth’s text produces an illusion of an ultimate meaning in a promised cure that would come through the analysis-reading of the text. In addition, by thinking through Jacques Lacan’s notions of empty and full speech, I look at the linguistic function that the psychoanalytic structure plays in the novel as it finally reveals this promised cure/meaning as an illusion. The role of psychoanalytic language in the construction of the novel also contributes to the forming of Portnoy’s cultural identity. For example, psychoanalytic terms intermingle with Yiddish through Portnoy’s identification with Freud as just another Jewish boy. The effect of the case as a literary conceit gives the reader a unique position within this meaning-making game, as he or she is led to identify with the analyst. However, the reader easily falls into this ruse by equating this position with the final conferral of meaning (typically repeating the opening diagnosis and definition of the complaint). As opposed to this type of reading, I argue that the case history as a literary genre, in its mixing of fiction and psychoanalysis, brings the body (of the narrator, the reader) into the meaning making process as the site at which the cure is performed. The body itself becomes a signifier, the seat of the affect that acts out the literary symptoms. By focusing on the role the body plays in the fictive psychoanalytic narrative, there is a new way to look at the ethical and sexual dilemma of Portnoy’s complaint, and thus a new way to read the humor and the suffering in Roth’s texts.

American Literature Association Conference – Boston, MA, May 24-27, 2007

Panel: Philip Roth and Bernard Malamud: Texts of a Relationship

Chair: * Victoria Aarons, Trinity University

Paper 1: “Philip Roth Looks at Bernard Malamud: From *Ghost Writer* to *New York Times* Postmortem” –

Evelyn Avery, Towson University

Abstract: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” From the beginning of his career, this *Torah* based philosophy, guided the pen of one of America’s most prominent Jewish American authors, Bernard Malamud, whose greatest short story collection, *The Magic Barrel*, and novels, such as *The Assistant* and *The Fixer*, testify to his understanding of Judaism and compassion for suffering Jews, whom he used, to also symbolize other peoples. Unfortunately, Malamud has not always been well-served by fellow Jewish writer, Philip Roth, whom he counted as a trustworthy friend. Case in point: Roth, with whom Malamud had an extended friendship from the 1960s to 1986 when the latter died, betrayed their personal and creative relationship in his novel *The Ghost Writer* (1979) and in his postmortem of his former “Maestro” in a *New York Times* essay (April 12, 1986). The pain personally inflicted on Malamud’s family, friends, and admirers was intense. It also spoke volumes about Roth, raising questions about his own motives.

Paper 2: * “Imagining the Perverse: Bernard Malamud’s *The Fixer* and Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America*” – Joel Salzberg, University of Colorado at Denver

Abstract: In his essay “Imagining Jews” (1974), Philip Roth seemed aggrieved by the imagination of Bernard Malamud “whose novels [*The Assistant* (1957), *The Fixer* (1966), and *Pictures of Fidelman* (1969)] have chronicled physical brutality and fleshly mortification in such detail.” Although Roth used the word “perverse” only to denigrate Yakov Bok’s captors in *The Fixer*, it is the unnamed operative term that drives his discussion. As early as *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969), however, Roth explored the resources of his own comically perverse imagination to lay bare the sources of Jewish sexual suffering embodied in Alexander Portnoy. Laughter rather than empathy was the expected reader response, an empathy that Roth himself presumably felt for Malamud’s characters in his much darker narratives. In 1974 Roth was not prepared to acknowledge that Bernard Malamud’s imaginative perversity might be legitimately employed as an adjunct to his moral vision or his plots. Ironically, Roth later declared in an interview with Hermione Lee (1984) that his own creative process was “a very trying spiritual exercise to siphon through your being qualities that are often alien to your moral makeup.” Indeed, two of Roth’s most powerful novels, *Sabbath’s Theater* (1995) and *The Plot Against America* (2004), are the result of pushing the boundaries of the perverse to their farthest limits.

Panel: *Sabbath’s Theater* and the “Discomfort” of Readers: A Roundtable Discussion

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

Participants: * James Bloom, Muhlenberg College, Timothy Parrish, Texas Christian University, Ross Posnock, Columbia University, and * Aimee Pozorski, Central Connecticut State University

This panel was an informal roundtable discussion that explored reader reception of Philip Roth’s 1995 novel, *Sabbath’s Theater* (which many consider the author’s masterpiece), and the relative dearth of criticism surrounding the text.



Evelyn Avery and Andrew Gordon at ALA, 2007

Philip Roth's First and Last:

Goodbye, Columbus and Everyman

By Philip Routh

The first time I saw Brenda she asked me to hold her glasses. Then she stepped out to the edge of the diving board and looked foggily into the pool; it could have been drained, myopic Brenda would never have known it. She dove beautifully, and a moment later she was swimming back to the side of the pool, her head of short-cropped auburn hair held up, straight ahead of her, as though it were a rose on a long stem. She glided to the edge and then was beside me. "Thank you," she said, her eyes watery though not from water. She extended a hand for her glasses but did not put them on until she turned and headed away. Her hands suddenly appeared behind her. She caught the bottom of her suit between thumb and index finger and flicked what flesh had been showing back where it belonged. My blood jumped.

With this first paragraph of Philip Roth's first book, a career begins, resoundingly. It evokes youth, beauty, hope — mostly hope of love. All are embodied in Brenda, the cool, self-assured water nymph. But this naiad wears glasses, and her last name turns out to be Patimkin. That she is a mere vulnerable human like us all, with her virtues and flaws, deepens her appeal. I felt that appeal when I first read the book, as a teenager. Now, rereading it many years later, I felt it again.

It is Neil who is given the honor of holding Brenda's glasses, and it is he who tells the story. He does so with a bright clarity — the youthful Roth's prose has a freshness to it, an original snap — as in Brenda's cheeky catching of the bottom of her suit and flicking "what flesh had been showing back where it belonged."

Goodbye, Columbus spans one summer. And no more. The fervent glow of love that Roth captures so well does not survive the complexities of life. A diaphragm is the purported device that leads to the breakup. I say "purported" because the end of the affair feels imposed on the plot (with Neil being the author's coconspirator). On the closing page, after leaving Brenda in a hotel room, Neil thinks, "I was sure I had loved Brenda, though standing there I knew I couldn't any longer. And I knew it would be a long while before I made love to anyone the way I had made love to her. With anyone else, could I summon up such a passion?"

But absent from his musings are despair and fear and doubt. It seems that, in leaving Brenda, Neil is making a decision: saying goodbye to one life — the conventional and enveloping one he doesn't want to

be part of, the world of the Patimkins — and resolutely turning toward another.

In this light the title, *Goodbye, Columbus*, is meaningful. Ron, Brenda's older brother, attended Ohio State University and was given a record when he graduated. He plays it for Neil. A Voice intones: "Life calls us, and anxiously if not nervously we walk out into the world and away from the pleasures of these ivied walls. But not from its memories . . ." "We shall choose husbands and wives, we shall choose jobs and homes, we shall sire children and grandchildren, but we will not forget you, Ohio State . . ." The record ends with a litany of goodbyes: "goodbye, Columbus . . . goodbye, Columbus . . . goodbye . . ."

Because Philip Roth has, over the years, been a strongly autobiographical writer, I cannot but think that there was a Brenda in a summer of his youth. And though, in the novella's last paragraphs, Neil gazes through the window of a darkened library, closed for the night, looking at a wall of books, it is not the dull life of a librarian that the young man is seeing in his Brenda-less future.

* * *

What life was beckoning to Philip Roth? It turns out that twenty-seven of the books in the world's libraries would be written by him. Roth's life would be one of tremendous literary success. *Goodbye, Columbus* was published in 1959 when Roth was twenty-six. The five stories that go with the title novella appeared in elite magazines: *Paris Review* (where *Goodbye* also appeared), *The New Yorker*, and *Commentary*. The book received the National Book Award. Out of the starting blocks, Philip Roth was a major novelist.

Not only was he a uniquely-talented early bloomer, but he was ambitious, focused, intelligent. At the age

of sixteen he went to Bucknell University and got a degree in English. From there he moved on to the University of Chicago where he received a M.A. in English Literature, staying to teach creative writing. It was while in Chicago that he met his mentor, Saul Bellow. Over the years, Roth taught creative writing at various universities, including Iowa. He made all the right moves. But that's what you have to do. And, in his case, there was that talent.

Philip Roth has lived almost fifty years since Brenda dove into the pool. In his long career, the achievement he will be ever-associated with is *Portnoy's Complaint*. That comic masterpiece, that howl of rage, in all its glorious vulgarity, plumbs themes that preoccupied him his whole career — sex and Jewishness. Tangled themes for him, and from inside the tangle not much light escapes.

I heard him interviewed by Terry Gross on "Fresh Air" in 2001, and he talked a bit about his personal life. I learned (as I drove through a rainy night) that he had some serious illnesses, including heart bypass surgery. He had a terrible bout of depression but was saved by medication. He sees no purpose to Life and has no religious beliefs (indeed, he is strongly anti-religious). His two unhappy marriages, which were childless, were not mentioned (of course they weren't, though they have provided material for Roth's novels). I got the impression that he lived alone.

He was a difficult interviewee. At times he would respond to a question by questioning Terry about her question. He did this in an intimate, gently toying manner. I found his subversion of the rules of the interview refreshing. (Keep the questions intelligent and straightforward or you're going to get them back.)

He said that he writes, writes, writes in his home in the Connecticut countryside. It seems that writing is his reason for living — his saying to himself and to the world: I can create, I exist. It is a way to stave off the darkness.

Philip Roth may produce many more novels, but in a way *Everyman* is his last. It's about the end of life, a goodbye to life. How much time is left to him? He is

not the young man of *Goodbye, Columbus*, with a fresh new world stretching ahead.

I wonder if he sees a form of immortality in the worlds he has created. A hundred years from now, people may read his books, and his characters and situations will come alive in their minds. Brenda will rise from the pool, Neil's blood will jump. Does the author come alive too, in some sense?

* * *

Everyman begins at a graveside. I had wanted to start this section with *Everyman's* opening paragraph, as I did with *Goodbye, Columbus*. But it's a long paragraph, and it doesn't have the immediate accessibility (nor that "snap") that the other one does. I don't mean that it isn't good writing, or that it's boring. It's entirely appropriate to the novel's subject matter. But

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young love and death are poles apart, and, let's admit it, we'd rather be at the poolside than the

graveside.

In fact, I had qualms about reading this book. I thought of it as an ordeal I would have to suffer through.

I was surprised. The book was not grueling to read. I know Roth can be raw, but he chose not to be. For example, the unnamed narrator (I'll have to call him *Everyman*) has open heart surgery, but the gory details of that surgery — the sawing through the rib cage, the removal of veins from the legs — are not described (though *Everyman* must surely have thought long and hard about the procedure). He has scars from the operation, and Roth simply states that fact.

In this short novel Roth explores, with care and honesty, the emotional state of a man facing the end of life.

On the surface this is not an autobiographical work. Roth's *Everyman* is not a successful author. He's a man who had a lucrative career as a commercial artist, and upon his retirement he turns to painting. But he realizes that he has no real talent. He

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And in This Corner...:

Michael Chabon Mixes it up with Roth's *Plot*

By Joe Kraus

In Max Apple's 1976 short story, "Inside Norman Mailer," he imagines himself as a boxer, a young contender taking on the title-holding champion, Mailer. It's a literalizing of Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*, one generation of writers challenging its predecessor in order to open up new creative ground. In the background, the shared Jewishness of both writers flits past, with Apple calling Mailer a "Jewish existentialist" and Mailer retorting, "How unlike Abraham thou art." Apple imagines himself giving Mailer a good run but tiring at the end, no match for the heavyweight.

In that light, Michael Chabon's new novel looks a bit like another title fight, this time with the challenger staring from his corner at Philip Roth and with the yellow *magen David* of American Jewish identity painted onto the canvas of the ring. Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* is many things, an experiment in the hard-boiled, a tribute to the plasticity of Yiddish, and an exploration of cultural Judaism in contrast to the religion, but it is also a counter-history in the mode and the setting of Roth's *The Plot Against America*.

Chabon has spoken widely about finding his inspiration for the novel from his poignant reaction to *Say it in Yiddish: A Phrasebook for Travelers*, a book that struck him, in the wake of the Holocaust, as an expression of denial. As he put it, it seemed odd to him that there was anywhere in the world that one could go to hear Yiddish spoken. At the heart of *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, then, he imagines the tiny Republic of Sitka, a country created along the coast of Alaska as a haven for Jews fleeing Nazi Europe and the failed Jewish uprising in 1948 Israel. The country they create, a place of Yiddish rather than Hebrew, of bitter consolation rather than millennial fulfillment, blossoms briefly but, by the time of the novel's events, settles into a gritty noir landscape. One heavy fact looms over it: in 2008, the land will revert to Alaskan and U.S. sovereignty, and most Jews will have to leave their homes again.

The premise allows Chabon to explore 21st century American Jewry in striking ways. Among the clever slang terms he devises are the Sitkans' dismissive

name of Mexicans for Jews who live anywhere south of Alaska and *noz* – as in sticking one's "nose" where it doesn't belong – for a detective. The Jews who survive in the tough environment seem tougher and wiser than the 'Mexicans' whom the history we know has thrown up. At one point the sister of protagonist Meyer Landsman finds herself imprisoned in a radical Hasidic sect's headquarters, where everything she sees – the lobby doors, the new oven of the kitchen, the flagpole – has a plaque thanking one or another generous American donor; on what she feels may be the last night of her life, she graffiti's "This detainment cell courtesy of the generosity of Neal and Risa Nudelman, Short Hills, New Jersey."

While such inventiveness is its own justification, Chabon has admitted in an interview with JBooks.com that at some conscious level he wanted to avoid "pulling his punch" as he sees Roth having done at the end of *The Plot Against America*. As he put it, "I don't understand the impulse of setting an alternate history novel in the past the way Roth did. The whole point of alternate history, to me, is to concoct, thereby, an alternate *present*. To set off the present by means of comparing it to its hitherto unknown freakish twin." Whatever else it is, then, *The Yiddish Policeman's Union* is also a critique of Roth's work, a 'counter-punch' against someone who must seem both an influence and a source of some anxiety.

The central point of difference between the two novels, then, is the sense each gives of the present. As the widely discussed ending of *The Plot Against America* suggests, even so wide a departure from actual history as a reversal in the election of 1936 still yields a present day very much like our own. Chabon, through his implicit critique, seems to charge Roth with the inability to imagine a world radically different from our own. The 2005 in *The Plot Against America* does seem indistinguishable from the 2005 that we all actually knew. By such a standard, the book clearly fails at alternative history.

For all of Chabon's inventive difference, though, it's easy to imagine Roth's implicit response to such a

charge: the world worth considering is the world we know. Most critics seemed to feel that the strongest parts of *The Plot Against America* came in its quiet moments, in Philip's meditations on his stamps or on his careful inspection of his cousin's wound. In such a light, Roth seems to announce in a different tone something he has maintained throughout his career: that he intends to consider the world in front of him and not the pretenses we create for ourselves. Even a man transformed into a giant breast remains a story about our world; it remains part of his effort to help us – whether 'us' is American-Jews, Americans, or human beings of the late 20th and early 21st century – see ourselves as we are.

Perhaps the key nightmare of *The Plot Against America* is that Jews wind up re-racialized. They understand themselves as human beings accused of Jewishness, something they cannot understand as criminal nor as legitimately defining themselves. Within that context, and uncharacteristically within Roth's work, the central characters of the work are less flawed than the world in which they live. In particular, Philip's father emerges as a man of uncommon dignity. As the scene in Washington makes particularly clear, he is more American than the "Americans" who have chosen Lindberg-style fascism over legitimate democracy.

If Philip is the point-of-view character, he has the excuse for his many mistakes that he is young and frightened. It takes him – and his brother – the duration of the novel to understand their father's wisdom and steadfast belief in America's ideals. We have, in Herman Roth, an almost infallible moral compass. We sense throughout the novel that his true north is our own time, a time that, despite its own many hypocrisies and inconsistencies, represents a profoundly positive alternative to the horrors of a fascistic America in a fascistic world.

Chabon's characters, instead, are Jews who live in a world with almost no non-Jews for contrast. They range in their Jewishness from world-weary to conniving to fanatical, but with the exception of a bewildered and gentle would-be messiah – himself fallen into heroin addiction and hopelessness – nobody has the right answer for the resignation and torpor that govern the community. Chabon denies us our own day as an easy alternative to the world he depicts. Sitka is a "freakish twin" to Israel, one that is much more a part of the United States, but one that also seems less relevant –

for all of its fascinating texture – than the Republic of Lindberg.

In each novel, representatives of organized Jewry show themselves as opportunistic and duplicitous, but Chabon places that blame on the comparatively exotic (and fictional) Verbover Hasidic sect. For Roth, it is the Reform Rabbi Bengelsdorf, a representative of the religious world that has spawned both himself and Chabon, who pursues the un-American, un-Jewish, unethical approach. Again, each choice throws the other into relief. On the one hand, Chabon selects a group defined entirely by its religion – though one given over to extensive and ruthless organized crime pursuits – as the vehicle for such misconduct. That seems potentially an indictment against Judaism itself.

On the other hand, Roth's selecting a mainstream, Reform-style leader points toward a greater self-indictment. The Verbover are not "us," neither American nor truly Sitkan. They are as determined and vicious as the Hamas terrorists we know today, but they are the antithesis of Meyer Landsman and the other *schlimazels* trying to live out their lives in the last days of the only country they know. Bengelsdorf is terrifying, for the most part, because we do recognize him. He is only a small way removed from many of the men (and some of the women) whom American Jews have taken as their spokespeople, and he represents what we ought to fear in ourselves.

Perhaps the most curious way in which *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* throws *The Plot Against America* into relief, however, comes in what I can only imagine is a coincidence. Chabon's hero, Meyer Landsman, has as his last name a term for a generic neighbor. At the end of the 19th century, *landsmenshaften*, associations of immigrants from the same villages or shtetls, were important cultural institutions, a handful of which lasted almost to the end of the 20th century. More recently, *landsman* has taken on something of a slang function for "Jew," a synonym for the English "M.O.T." or "member of the tribe."

In each case, *landsman* carries a connotation of "someone like us," and in that light it seems a near synonym for "everyman," the title, of course, of Roth's follow-up novel, one that must have come out too late for Chabon to know it as he wrote. Landsman is, therefore, like the unnamed protagonist of *Everyman*, an individual whose fears and temptations echo

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Philip Roth Society Annual General Meeting Minutes

Held in Conjunction with the American Literature Association Meeting, 5/26/07

Present: Derek Parker Royal (President), Jay L. Halio, James Bloom, Debra Shostak, Elaine Safer, David Brauner, Wensong Lun.

Apologies were received from Jessica Rabin (Treasurer) and Joe Kraus (newsletter editor), who were unable to attend the meeting.

Derek began by welcoming everyone to the meeting and then he delivered the reports of the Treasurer and the Newsletter Editor in their absence.

Secretary/Treasurer's Report:

Jessica Rabin reported the following:

Membership Statistics and Financial Report, June 2006-May 2007

Total members 2007 (December 2006-May 2007): 33
 Total members at this time in 2006: 50
 Total members 2006: 79
 Total members 2005: 71
 Total members 2004: 81
 Total members 2002-2003: 42
 Number of past members who renewed in 2007: 25
 New members in 2007: 8

2007 members with US addresses: 25
 2007 members with international addresses: 8
 Austria: 1
 India: 1
 Spain: 2
 United Kingdom: 4

Current balance: \$2625.64
 Debts: start-up costs incurred by Derek Royal (\$196.43); to be reimbursed as a perpetual membership

Tasks accomplished as Secretary/Treasurer:

- maintained and updated membership spreadsheets

- added addresses for gratis copies (EBSCO, Wylie, Houghton Mifflin, ABELL, Index to Jewish Periodicals)
- transmitted Directory of Members information to our webmaster (Derek Royal) and our Newsletter editor (Joe Kraus)
- deposited dues into our Amegy Bank account
- renewed CELJ membership
- renewed domain name
- sent out welcome emails to new members and confirmations of renewals to returning members
- solicited renewals
- generated Calls for Papers for conferences and reviewed submissions
- helped with manuscripts for *Philip Roth Studies* with Heldref Publications

Suggestions for the next year:

- modify membership form (and Paypal form) to allow new members to indicate where they found out about PRS and use this information to target our recruitment efforts
- modify online membership form to allow members to indicate whether they wish to be listed in the Directory
- make Newsletters available in PDF form for members who join after one of the year's newsletters has already been sent out
- coordinate Newsletter publications with solicitations for renewals (November)
- consider allowing members to choose whether to receive their newsletter by US Mail or PDF
- keep Paypal, as a number of our members have taken advantage of it
- try to increase percentage of members who renew
- consider offering a 2-year membership for people who are committed to PRS but find it bothersome to renew each year
- actively solicit memberships from academic libraries
- promote *Philip Roth Studies* amongst PRS members
- promote PRS in *Philip Roth Studies*

Newsletter Editor Report:

Joe Kraus reported the following:

- The good news from the newsletter is that we continue to produce two substantial issues a year, each including bibliographical material that receives consistent acknowledgement as a useful aide to scholars in Roth studies. Our materials are indexed in a number of places, and I regularly receive requests for back issues.
- In addition, thanks largely to Harvard Law School's generosity in paying for postage and handling (through the person of Prof. Bruce Hay), our expenses are surprisingly low.
- The less good news is that we have had consistent production delays. Because of my teaching schedule, I have found it increasingly difficult to produce newsletters by the end-of-the-semester date that the officers have agreed among ourselves would best serve the society. The best I have been able to do is produce newsletters roughly a month behind what we had hoped. I am disappointed in that schedule, but I see no immediate way to resolve the problem.
- In addition, I sense that interest in submitting to the newsletter has diminished to a degree now that the journal is in place and producing such high quality work. My challenge with the newsletter is to better articulate the sort of material that makes sense: shorter queries, notes on Roth's context, references or sources, and casual ("academic but relaxed") essays of 500-1500 words exploring in-progress larger articles or summarizing conference papers or classroom lectures.
- I have hoped that we might jumpstart some written exchanges, and I have requested reactions to a handful of topics, most recently to the prompt "What is your reaction to the term '21st Century Roth'?" I was less aggressive than I had hoped I would be in soliciting responses to the prompt, but was disappointed as well at nobody's responding to the straight-forward CFP. I intend to contact a number of members requesting quick, "informed but conversational" responses of 500-800 words, but I would be grateful for the assembled membership to suggest other topics.

- More broadly, I would welcome the membership's sense of what is most appropriate for the newsletter in the changed context that the journal brings.
- Finally, we have discussed the possibility of putting all of the newsletter's back issues on-line at our website. I would appreciate the membership's sense on that question as well.

President's and Philip Roth Studies Editor's Report

Derek reported the following:

Philip Roth Society

- 1,000 new bookmarks promoting the Society had been printed and will be used for publicity and membership recruitment at future conferences.
- Since the last business meeting in San Francisco, May 2006, the Roth Society has sponsored panels at the following conferences:
 - One panel at the ALA Symposium on American Fiction in San Diego, Sept. 2007
 - One panel at the University of Louisville's Twentieth-Century Literature and Culture Conference
 - Two panels at this year's Boston ALA
- The society plans on sponsoring similar conference panels over the next year
 - Derek will send out a call for papers for the 2008 Louisville conference later this summer
 - Derek recommended that the society continue to use one of its ALA Conference panel slots as a roundtable
 - Those present discussed agreed that we should focus next year's ALA roundtable on the new novel, *Exit Ghost*
 - Derek stated that he would find several Roth scholars willing to participate
 - Those present discussed ideas for the other ALA panel. Jim Bloom recommended that we hold a panel on Roth and the visual arts. Everyone liked the idea and agreed that we should put out a call for that topic.

- Derek Royal asked Jim Bloom if he would like to organize and moderate that panel, and Jim agreed to do so.

Philip Roth Studies

- *Philip Roth Studies* now has over 20 institutional subscribers, which is still much lower than we would want. Heldref is making efforts at increasing those subscriptions by the following:
 - Making the full text of the journal available online for subscribers via Metapress.
 - Restructuring their advertising department and making more of a concerted effort to get new subscribers
- Though there were plans last year for the journal to become a quarterly, these plans were shelved after a change of Executive Directors at Heldref, and it has remained as a semi-annual.
- The spring publication of the journal is late, due largely to problems with the journal's old managing editor (and Heldref contact). Heldref has now replaced that managing editor with a new one, Megan Atwood, and she has been doing an outstanding job in getting everything back on track. The spring issue will be published later this summer.
- Beginning with the spring 2007 issue, the Editorial Board will be replaced by a board of 19 consulting editors, which means that the editor (Derek) will be able to call on a wider range of readers for submissions, commissioning three reader reports on each article, giving equal recognition of their services.
 - There was some debate about whether it was indeed necessary to have as many as 3 reader's reports for each submission or whether a third opinion should be sought only if the two initial reports were at variance with each other.
- The journal's two editorial assistants, Iris Johnson and Kent Ross, have now been placed with two new editorial assistants: Jonne Akens and

Sean George. Both of these assistants are doctoral students at the journal's home institution, Texas A&M University-Commerce

- Derek also suggested that future publication in *Philip Roth Studies* ought to be contingent on membership within the Roth Society. This is common practice among many other journals and is an obvious way of boosting membership.
 - All present agreed to this policy change.

General Discussion

- The meeting then turned to the Society's recent drop in membership, noting that many memberships have lapsed this year.
- Jay Halio suggested raising the cost of society membership but including *Philip Roth Studies* as part of the package provided to subscribers.
- Debra Shostak suggested sending out hard copy letters to members informing them that their membership has lapsed and encouraging them to renew.
- Jay Halio then suggested that the Society might offer two alternative levels of society membership: one that would include the journal and one that would not. He also suggested discontinuing the newsletter and incorporating it into the journal.
- David Brauner pointed out that it was already a challenge to fit everything that the editor wanted to publish in each issue of the journal.
- Derek Royal suggested that another way to go might be to produce an online version of the *Philip Roth Society Newsletter*.
- David Brauner suggested that this should be an alternative to, rather than a replacement for, the hard copy.
- Elaine Safer suggested moving over to an annual newsletter, instead of one that was published twice a year.

Respectfully submitted by David Brauner

Correction:

Please note that the date of the previous *Philip Roth Society Newsletter* should read Fall 2006. It appeared incorrectly at the top left hand pages of that issue. As many of you will recall, we have recently changed the numbering of our issues and volumes so that a volume consists of the newsletters published within a calendar year.

Become a Member of the Philip Roth Society



To become a member of the Philip Roth Society, print out this form and mail it to the address at the bottom of the page. You can find a copy of this form on our society website under "Membership" at www.rothsociety.org as well as directions for joining the Society over the Internet.

Annual membership fees are \$15 for individuals and \$30 for institutions (add \$5 for overseas addresses), which includes a subscription to *The Philip Roth Society Newsletter* as well as a 20 percent discount on subscription to *Philip Roth Studies*, published by Heldref Publications.

If you would like to be listed in the Directory of Members, please indicate so by checking the appropriate space(s) on the form.

Name: _____

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Address: _____

_____ Is this your work or home address? _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

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I give permission for the following information to be listed in the Directory of Members at the Philip Roth Society's web site. (Please check all that apply):

____ Name ____ Institutional Affiliation ____ Email ____ Address

____ Phone ____ Web Page Address

Full Name Signature: _____

Mail to:
The Philip Roth Society
c/o Jessica G. Rabin, Secretary/Treasurer
Department of English
Anne Arundel Community College
101 College Parkway
Arnold, MD 21012

Roth First and Last

(Continued from page 7)

acutely feels the hollowness of not having the consolation of being able to create art. He is left with nothing — just “the aimless days and the uncertain nights and the impotently putting up with the physical deterioration and the terminal sadness and the waiting and waiting for nothing.”

That said — that Roth does not use many outward facts from his own life — there is an emotional authenticity. After all, is Roth not Everyman? Despite his considerable success, and the purpose his writing must give to his days, Roth must face what his character does.

His Everyman lives alone, is lonely; he has a loving daughter (who, though supportive, does not live near him) and a dear brother (who he breaks from, in “a sick man’s rage” at the happy, ever-healthy, contentedly-married Howie). Those two — daughter and brother — will be the only ones at his graveside who deeply care for him. He has regrets, mostly concerning his failed relationships with women and his long estrangement from his two sons. He is beset with desire for the young women he sees jogging as he sits on the boardwalk, a desire that he knows must go unfulfilled. More loss — that of sexuality. Nothing can answer his needs, for he has the elemental need to be what he once was.

He fears helplessness and death. For this Everyman, who has no religious beliefs, death is oblivion, simply Not Being anymore, and the void terrifies him.

“You just take it and endure it,” Everyman thinks, but the novel shows how very hard it is to do that.

Yet the book is not all grimness. Other feelings are elicited in the reader. Everyman is a decent, compas-

sionate man (the scene with the suffering Millicent is especially touching). And, since I mentioned a scene, there are others that are done masterfully — Everyman’s encounter with the young female jogger and his talk with the gravedigger. Howie’s farewell speech at the gravesite (beginning with “Let’s see if I can do it. Now let’s get to this guy. About my brother . . .”) is a moving monologue in which Howie does indeed “do it.” There is pleasure for the reader in such prose. There are some graphic sex scenes, and a burst of rage at his unforgiving sons — parts that, for me, struck a discordant note — but these are exceptions to the rule. At one point Everyman muses that his “combativeness had been replaced by a huge sadness.”

One refuge for Everyman are memories of the distant past. He must go back — back past his adulthood and his teenage years — to a time when he was capable of a purity of emotion. His father, mother and Howie kindle tender memories. He feels a nostalgia for his father’s jewelry store. During his many angioplasties he distracts himself as they insert the arterial catheter, “by reciting under his breath the lists of watches he’d first alphabetized as a small boy helping at the store after school — ‘Benrus, Bulova, Croton, Elgin . . .’”

And he repeatedly remembers riding the big waves of the Atlantic, sunlight blazing off the water. The vitality of the boy with the unscathed body in its exhilarating struggle.

Ah, Life! Everyman sees, as if peering through the jeweler’s loupe engraved with his father’s initials, “the perfect, priceless planet itself — at his home, the billion-, the trillion-, the quadrillion-carat planet Earth!”

Then the author extinguishes it forever. As he must.

Chabon and Roth

(Continued from page 9)

all of ours. Where Landsman spends the novel knowing about the inevitable end of Sitka and contemplating a life without progeny of his own, the end of the book offers some relief from that bleak a vision. *Everyman*, though, looks at a similarly imminent emptiness and does not blink.

Maybe, then, it’s Chabon who pulls his punch at the

last or, as Chabon suggests, Roth simply works best when he’s inside the ring that he knows best, the cordoned off world of contemporary America. Either way, the two novels side-by-side suggest a surprisingly spirited bout. While it falls to each of us separately to score the match, the two novels do speak profitably to one another, suggesting both Roth’s continued relevance and Chabon’s emergence as a writer hard to ignore.

The champ, as ever, acquits himself, but the challenger certainly makes him work.

It's Easy:

Subscribe to *Philip Roth Studies*

Remember that membership in the Philip Roth Society is separate from subscribing to our journal, *Philip Roth Studies*. Even if you are a member, you will need to make a separate order through Heldref Publications, the publisher of the journal, in order to begin your subscription.

The good news is that they can offer you a 20 percent discount on the subscription price if you are a society member.

To order online go to <http://www.heldref.org/html/question.html> or, if you prefer, you can subscribe by phone at 800.365.9753, by fax at 202.293.6130, or by e-mail at subscribe@heldref.prg.

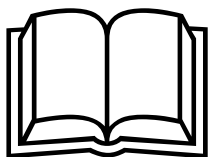
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However you place your order, be certain to indicate that you are a society member.

The full price for subscriptions is \$38 a year; with your society discount it is \$30.40.

In addition to a personal subscription, please consider requesting that your library subscribe to the journal as well. Any subscription is, of course, helpful for the life of the journal, but institutional subscriptions carry particular weight. They represent support for the work for the work of the society, and they make our work accessible to larger numbers of people.



President's Message: An Update on the Society

(Continued from page 1)

ference participation. We plan to offer another society-sponsored panel at the 2008 Twentieth-Century Literature and Culture Conference (held at the University of Louisville in February), and we have just placed a call for papers for this panel. And for next year's American Literature Association Conference, we plan on doing what we've done over the past few years: holding both a discussion roundtable and a more traditional panel of scholarly papers. This time the roundtable will center around Roth's new novel *Exit Ghost*, and our panel will take up the theme of the visual arts in Roth's novels. James Bloom, at Muhlenberg College, has kindly offered to organize the latter. Should you have any interest in participating in any of these conference panels—or in proposing a society-sponsored panel at another conference—then please

contact me.

One final word: If your library doesn't do so already, please encourage them to subscribe to *Philip Roth Studies*, which is now being offered as full text through the Metapress electronic database. Also, I welcome any submission from members for possible publication in *Philip Roth Studies*, and I strongly encourage all members to contribute to the society newsletter. Joe is always looking for short essays and reviews to publish in the newsletter. He is especially interested in contributions that may be more impressionistic or even pedagogical in nature. Our newsletter is the perfect vehicle for Roth Society members to exchange ideas on teaching methods and reading strategies that they have found particularly helpful.



The Philip Roth Society Newsletter

In this issue:

Minutes of the Society annual meeting
Roth First and Last a reflection by Philip Roth
Chabon and Roth step into the boxing ring
Abstracts from recent conference presentations
Bibliographic update of recent Roth publications

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