

## The Protean Complaint in Philip Roth's Fiction<sup>i</sup>

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### Abstract

*The paper argues that Philip Roth is not just a ribald fantasist or an erotic dreamer, but a serious modern novelist who confronts his Jewish, Christian and urban American heritage to represent the new protean lifestyle of his male Jewish protagonists who are guided by the gratification of sexual and psychological needs. Roth employs the tones of self-mockery and complaint to critique the repressive codes of Jewish morality surrounding his protagonists and helps them to release their psychic energies in love and promiscuity. As such a typical Rothian protagonist pursues the myth of total physical gratification through the successive women he encounters, all the time trying to escape the stranglehold of his psychologically repressive middle-class Jewish mother. An ideal protagonist of Roth seeks to claim an emotional and cultural terra cognita where he can enjoy freedom and bliss. But his relationships with both WASP and Shikse women leave him dissatisfied and enervated. He paradoxically realizes that while seeking the twin goals of freedom and gratification he is moving away from them. In his search for a better world, the protagonist encounters operational men, men who have come to terms with reality, and who can now teach him how to lead a meaningful life. The protean complaint of the protagonist functions as an important strategy to evolve a new way to manage urban reality and forge a protean identity. The hilarious fantasy world of Roth's novels carries a more serious message of ethnic marginality, emasculation and urban loneliness.*

Philip Roth's protagonists possess an inherently modern character challenging and absorbing the ethos of urban Christian America. But they also retain a residual Jewishness that proves detrimental to their growth and distinctiveness in later life. Their Jewish life is seen more as a repressive code that thwarts sexual and psychological development and prevents reinvigoration. Roth's characters possess a tendency to release their psychic energy in short-lived love relationships and promiscuity hoping to realize maximum happiness or felicity. The myth of total felicity is further complicated by the protean content of their personalities and their ethnic background. In a way, Roth's fiction concerns itself with the various difficulties, psychological and emotional, that come in the way of the protean man. Roth lays greater emphasis on childhood experience in shaping character and personality than his counterparts such as Saul Bellow or Ronald Sukenick.<sup>ii</sup>

Most critics do not find in the novels of Roth anything more than a study in guilt and

repression, or a profanation of Jewish values and institutions. Ihab Hassan, for instance, finds in Roth's fiction "a ribald fantasy of guilt and onanism, altruism and prurience."<sup>iii</sup> Jewish critics, like Alfred Kazin, see Roth's novels, especially in *Portnoy's Complaint*, a "calculated profanation"<sup>v</sup> of Jewish values and institutions. Some critics, like Allen Guttman for instance, find in his fiction a "process of assimilation and its concomitant crisis of identity."<sup>vii</sup> Leslie Fiedler feels that though Roth is a "Master of Dreams," his achievement mainly in the areas of love and sex has lost its force that it had during the Sixties. He further argues that Roth has achieved success since then and no longer represents the loser.<sup>vi</sup> Other critics such as Benjamin De Mott see in Roth's fiction only "humiliation" and "degradation."<sup>vii</sup> No critic to my knowledge has referred to a new urban rhythm that has emerged in Roth's fiction as he comes to grips with the Jewish and Christian traditions on the one hand and urban life on the other. I have tried to show that though there are complaints and self-mockery in his fiction, Roth's purpose seems to be to rise above them and to show that a new reality has emerged, which is born out of urban existence. His fiction also suggests that individuals must take cognizance of this reality as they constantly interact with it and are affected by it.

Most of the novels written by Roth may be seen as passionate complaints by Jewish protagonists to the American society about their incapacity to understand themselves, yet the complaints are also attempts at understanding their own maladjustment through the process of rumination, introspection, and articulation. The novels are as such, to resort to a phrase of T. S. Eliot, "a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate."<sup>viii</sup> For instance, *Portnoy's Complaint*,<sup>ix</sup> as the title itself suggests, is a complaint against the repression in a middle-class Jewish home from which the protagonist suffers. Again, *Letting Go*<sup>x</sup> begins with a complaint by Gabriel Wallach: "I was about ready to find somebody to complain to" (LG, p. 4). The other novels do not make the complaint so explicitly but the complaint is undoubtedly there. It becomes a recurrent theme in Roth's novels.

### **Establishing Connections in an Absurd World**

Roth's fiction represents a sense of longing, a desire to make intelligible, an attempt "to describe, and then to make credible much of the American reality."<sup>xi</sup> He is eager to translate the mystery of the world and its absurdity into meaningful connections.<sup>xii</sup> This has been the concern of most American writers from Emerson, Thoreau and Hawthorne to Fitzgerald, Hemingway and Flannery O'Connor whose minds dwelt upon "that nothingness" in the world, which invariably escaped understanding or representation. Roth's characters are equally sensitive to the "nothingness" and emptiness in the universe that at times makes things rather mysterious. In *The Breast*,<sup>xiii</sup> David Kepesh ruminates,

'I know about the perspective from which everything appears awesome and mysterious. Reflect upon eternity, consider, if you are up to it, oblivion, and everything that is a wonder' (B, p. 3).

The absence of any recognized form of behavior throws a smoke screen over his perspective till reality becomes blurred and imprecise.

For most Rothian protagonists' life becomes "awesome and mysterious"<sup>xiv</sup> and death full of

apprehension and absurd.<sup>xv</sup> Mostly, the protagonists express their fear and absurdity by behaving erratically and abnormally. It is the progression of this absurdity that Roth attempts to capture in the lives of his protagonist. It is the desire to understand man's life and give him new beliefs and metaphors that distinguishes Roth from other writers like Meyer Lewin and Leon Uris.

### **Ethnic Marginality in an American City**

The complaint is most intense when Roth's archetypal protagonist feels his ethnic marginality in an American city. It is brought to the surface by the social distance between Jews and *Wasps* and further distanced by Roth's own skepticism. In *My Life as a Man*,<sup>xvi</sup> for instance, Peter Tarnopol, artist and academic, feels like "a foreigner being held against his will in a hostile and alien country." He becomes conscious of his marginality as he walks hurriedly to Spielvogel's office in New York to keep an appointment (MLM, p. 234). He is similar to Lonoff's fictional hero in *The Ghost Writer*,<sup>xvii</sup> a post-World War II hero, who expresses the Jewish "ambiguities of prudence," the "anxieties of disorder," and the "life-hunger, life-bargains, and life-terror in their most elementary manifestations" (GW, p. 14). Incidentally, Lonoff himself is a fictional character in the novel and it is possible to perceive a double sense of marginality in his character.

Similar to Lonoff (or his fictional hero), Roth's protagonists are skeptical of the Hebraic tradition. In fact, they possess an ambivalent attitude toward it; they are drawn to it and are repelled by it at the same time. They do not feel the passionate and categorical commitment to Judaism as their ancestors had done once. In most cases the protagonists share the Jewish world vicariously and have little emotional attachment to it until they are reminded of their Jewishness in the ambience of a *Wasp* city.

Perhaps, this is the reason for their ambivalent attitude toward Judaism. Intellectually they are involved with the affairs of the Judaic past; emotionally they are concerned with the affairs of their American present. For instance, Nathan Zuckerman is drawn by the intensely emotional and, at times, strongly Jewish content of Lonoff's writings. But he is especially drawn to Lonoff's fiction because Lonoff brings a skeptical attitude to the portrayal of his characters.

But then, along with tens of thousands of others, I discovered E. I. Lonoff, whose fiction seemed to me a response to the same burden of exclusion and confinement that still weighed upon the lives of those who had raised me, and that had informed our relentless household obsession with the status of the Jews (GW, p. 12).

Furthermore, Nathan's father is directly and passionately involved with the affairs of the European Jewry. But, for Nathan this involvement is peripheral. At the most, for him it is an intellectual involvement.

### **Israel and the Jewish Past**

For Portnoy too his involvement with Israel is a fleeting fancy. He visits Israel to revive his Jewish past and by it escape his traumatic present. But his visit to Israel is a complete failure, as he does not find confirmation of his protean present there. Instead of being a promised land Israel becomes a place of "Exile" for him (PC, p. 272). In Israel, Portnoy "cannot really grasp

hold of' the Jewish culture and values; he feels he is in wonderland (PC, p. 289). This is the case with David Kepesh, Nathan Zuckerman, Gabe Wallach and others too. The ambivalent attitude reflects how far Roth has traveled from Judaism yet how close he is to it. "I cannot find a true and honest place in the history of believers that begins with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob on the basis of the heroism of these believers or of their humiliation and anguish," says Roth.

The protagonist vicariously participates in the events of the East European world and shares the environment of the Pale, the *shtetl* or the *Holocaust*.<sup>xviii</sup> As he shares the world, he also shares its insecurity and by virtue of their association realizes his communion with the rest of the Jews.<sup>xix</sup> Through a reading of the works of Lonoff and by associating with him, Nathan shares the insecurity of the *shtetl* and the persecution of the Jews in the Pale. He feels that reading Lonoff's stories,

... revived in me for our own largely Americanized clan, moneyless immigrants, shopkeepers to begin with, who'd carried on a *shtetl* life ten minutes walk from the pillared banks and gargoyled insurance cathedrals of downtown Newark; and what is more, feelings of kinship for our pious, unknown ancestors, whose Galician tribulations had been only a little less foreign to me, while growing up securely in New Jersey, than Abraham's in the land of Canaan" (GW, p. 13).

Nathan experiences the Newark life directly, while he shares the *shtetl* life indirectly through observation of and interaction with Jews who have settled in Newark. Being sympathetic to those who have lived in the Old World ghettos, Nathan seeks Lonoff's friendship. For, Lonoff is to Nathan a "some quaint remnant of the Old World ghetto, an out-of-step folklorist pathetically oblivious of the major currents of literature and society" (GW, p. 10). Nathan's desire to seek Lonoff's friendship is an attempt to re-establish his links with the Jewish past, just as his desire to marry Amy Bellete, who is the victim of Belsen and Auschwitz, a means to justify his Jewishness. Perhaps, these incidents point to Roth's attempt to justify his own sense of the Jewish past and to discredit the arraignment of anti-Semitism about his fiction. In no way does it point to a reversion to Jewish values.<sup>xx</sup>

In Roth, one may discern a movement away from the Jewish tradition and an entry into the protean one. Yet it would be a grave misrepresentation of facts if one thought of Roth as an American writer who has completely eschewed his Jewish past as some critics (like Irving Howe, for example) think.<sup>xxi</sup> In other words, though Roth is affected and motivated by the past that he shares with other Jewish writers like Saul Bellow, Joseph Heller, Leslie Epstein and Ronald Sukenick, he uses the Jewish tradition to show the emergence of a new protean life-style. This he does through satirizing some of the most cherished Jewish institutions especially, the family, and some of the most powerful Jewish values, especially modesty. The tone of travesty that is on the increase in the writings of the novelists acquires both intensity and complexity in Roth.

### **The Image of the Sea-Faring Columbus**

Similar to the stories written by Lonoff in *The Ghost Writer*, Roth's stories too are ruminations "about wandering Jews" (GW, p. 11) who have come to America in search of the

Promised Land. The wandering nature of the Jew in America is incorporated in the *œuvre* of the novelist through the dominant imagery of exploration especially in the image of the seafarer Columbus. This image suggests the changing nature of the personality of Roth's protagonist and points to the protean life-style he espouses.

Like the famous explorer Columbus, who discovered America, the typical Rothian hero is looking for America also; only the search of Roth's hero is turned inward and the landscape is interiorized. He scans the horizon of his self-seeking telltale signs of an emotional and cultural land, where he can enjoy freedom and happiness. He believes that the sexual union with *Wasp* women, leading to a temporary oneness of the two partners, would help him to achieve the twin purpose, but he soon discovers that his need for variety and change breaks relationship with women far too often than he can take. He suddenly realizes, paradoxically that he is moving away from his twin goals of freedom and happiness while he is seeking them.

In *Letting Go*, while Gabriel Wallach introduces himself to the Herzes in their apartment, on the television screen three pilgrims appear, who converse atop a ship as they look for land:

The screen showed three men dressed as pilgrims, scanning the horizon from the railing of a ship. 'It looks to be land sir,' said one of them in an Anglo-Irish accent—while I said, 'How do you do, my name is Gabe Wallach' (LG, p. 173).

Similar to the Anglo-Irish pilgrims, Gabriel Wallach too is a hyphenated American; and just like them he also wants to say that he has arrived. Through the device of synchronization of dialogues and salutatory greetings the novel suggests Wallach in the role of the twentieth century Columbus looking for a place for himself.

### **The Chimera of Steadfast Love**

Again the collection of short stories entitled *Goodbye, Columbus*<sup>xxii</sup> has for its title story the theme of blighted love. The title Goodbye, Columbus is taken from a music record that has for its theme a song of student life at Ohio State University. The song is played repeatedly in the story and is heard by the protagonist, Neil Klugman. It symbolizes Klugman's desire to discover his sexual and psychological America in Brenda Patamkin. The inverted image of Columbus is suggested in many ways beside the title itself. For instance, the place Columbus, Ohio, is not only a place where Brenda's brother Ronald studied, it is also a place where the leaders of Reform Judaism met in 1937 to resuscitate the *Talmud* and revive the *Yiddishkeit*. Both the song and the convention of 1937 mark the permanent loss of a way of life and suggest the inverted nature of the Columbus image. The image is ironical because Columbus found his America, while Klugman has not. He dreams of being adrift on a sea of change and is unable to stay on the shore for long where beautiful black women (another hyphenated group) stay (GC, p. 53).

Most of Roth's protagonists believe that sexual union with women is the only method by which they can stay on the land of emotional and physical happiness. For instance Portnoy confesses to Dr. Spielvogel that through sex he would,

discover America. *Conquer America*—maybe that's more like it. Columbus, Captain Smith, Governor Winthrop, General Washington—and Portnoy. As though my manifest destiny is

to seduce a girl from each of the forty-eight states (PC, p. 265).

The sexual nature of the protagonist's journey continues through *The Professor of Desire*<sup>xxiii</sup> into *The Ghost Writer*.

In all these novels steadfast love appears a chimera while the battered hero sees himself sailing across the high seas on the weak plank of his self without land in sight. For instance, David Kepesh is harried by dreams of separation from Claire Ovington, and Nathan Zuckerman grieves over the departure of Amy Bellete. In fact, the inversion of the theme of Columbus's discovery of America shows that the protagonists can neither find the land where they can be happy nor experience the joy of having arrived; they are constantly adrift on a sea of change. The feeling of being adrift all the time is a step in the direction of a protean life-style.

### **The Rise of the Protean Self**

In the absence of any recognizable forms of accepted behavior, earlier provided by the Hebraic tradition, Roth's protagonists find themselves unable to make sense of their experience.<sup>xxiv</sup> As such they see orientation from objects and events themselves, that is, they interpret the thing the way it impresses upon their minds. This is an important aspect of the protean man that Roth's protagonists embody. By depending entirely upon their own interpretation of experiences the characters change with the same rapidity as their experiences. In this way they locate themselves in the flux of urban society and claim a place for themselves in it, howsoever transitory it may be. Saul Bellow has written of the contemporary novelist that: "The fixed points seems to be disappearing. Even the self is losing its firm outline."<sup>xxv</sup> Roth's protagonists confirm this view: "The boundaries of my own personality," feels Gabriel Wallach, "seemed as blurry and indefinite and hazy, as the damp blowing mist above the river I had crossed from Manhattan" (LG, p. 172).

The protean nature of Roth's protagonist is complicated by his self-centeredness in adult life and his sexual suppression during childhood. Both these aspects affect his life-interest and his relationship with others. His obsessive self-definition forces him to acquire certain narcissistic traits, which prevents him from recognizing the separateness of others and experiencing enduring love. Enduring love remains only a desire that is sexual, psychological and intellectual in nature. For instance, Gabriel Wallach's seesaw relationships with women, his father, and friends depend upon his narcissism and the changing nature of his personality. At times, these relationships strike him as life giving and at others as cramping and destructive.<sup>xxvi</sup> Perhaps, it means that a typical protagonist, because of his sense of inner insecurity, wants to possess America and not live in it. Sexual possession of *Wasp* girls becomes the means by which he can possess America, and when he has had the peak and comedown experiences in them he finally wants to distill the experience and understand himself and his relationship to the land of his birth. What he understands or fails to understand is the nature of his relationship to America.

As already stated in Roth's fiction the need of the protagonist to seek self-definition leads him, especially in areas of interpersonal relationships, to his self-centeredness. When this tendency becomes intense the archetypal protagonist conceives of the world as an enormous mirror in which he sees his personality reflected. When this phenomenon is translated into

practical terms, it implies that the protagonist believes he is the center of any relationship; therefore, his feelings and desires are central in the world. The other person, invariably the woman he loves, becomes an extension of his personality. Believing that all events and experiences arise from him and return to him, Roth's hero disregards the feeling of others. When the women do not conform to his belief or feeling, he either tries to overpower them sexually and psychologically or leaves them for someone else. Ironically, during this time he laments, as David Kepesh does in *The Professor of Desire*, that no one understands him. "No, nobody understands me not even I myself" (POD, p. 26).

In *My Life as a Man* Peter Tarnopol regards himself as the focal point in the universe and believes himself to be the center of everyone's attention. Consequently, his relationship with Maureen does not succeed and Maureen's anguished cry in the taxi, "Must you always be at the center of *everything*," neatly sums up Tarnopol's attitude toward himself and others (MLM, p. 120).<sup>xxvii</sup>

Tarnopol's self-centeredness prevents him from seeing incidents in their true perspective as he has a tendency to overestimate reality. Perhaps he imparts his own sense of anxiety to the events and finds them different and more intimidating. For instance, Tarnopol gets extremely worried about the suicide attempt made by his beloved, Susan McCall, and imagines that she would attempt it in future as well. In other words, when his personal sense of anxiety gets involved in it he unconsciously magnifies the seriousness of the incident. Tarnopol's attitude towards McCall prompts Dr. Spielvogel to say,

It is you, you see, who is blowing this up out of all proportions. Your narcissism again, I may say so. Much too much overestimation of well, of practically everything (MLM, p. 222).

The "overestimation" of reality is a tendency common to most of Roth's protagonists and stems from their self-centeredness.

### **Delusions of the Protean Self**

The overestimation of reality at times makes it impossible for them to distinguish between fact and fantasy. When this happens the protagonist suffers from delusions. This is the subject of the novel *The Breast* where fact and fiction become fused to such an extent that the protagonist, David Kepesh, does not know the difference between the fiction he reads and the life he lives. Kepesh admits to his psychiatrist that his reading of Gogol's "The Nose" and Kafka's "Metamorphosis" has caused the hallucinatory experience in which he conceives of himself as an enormous female breast. Dr. Klinger cautions Kepesh that if he kept up this "spirit of whimsy" he would surely invite more trouble. "Proceed with this line of thought and you will so weaken the hold that *you* happen to have on a uniquely different reality, that the next thing you know, you would have *produced* genuine and irreversible delusions exactly like those you now claim to have" (B, p. 58). Here Roth delineates the absurdity of the inner cosmic space of the protean man as he encounters complex images and ideas. Through the use of the mocking tone—discussed later in this chapter—Roth demonstrates the essential weapon of the protean man to combat the absurdity of life and death. The tone of mockery also shows that Roth is

having a laugh at his critics and at those who fear a new history.

Narcissism makes Roth's protagonists consider others, especially women, peripheral or at the most resources for their own self-glorification. They find women either "just the Miss America of a narcissist's dream" (MLM, p. 293), or "a big fat feather in your prick" (PC, p. 229). The consequence of this attitude is the destruction of their love relationships. The destruction of the love relationships leaves the protagonists lonely and sexually frustrated.

### **Imagery of the Empty Refrigerator**

These feelings are expressed in the novels through the imagery of the refrigerator. In *Goodbye, Columbus* the image of the refrigerator shows the frustrating sense of isolation of the protagonist, Klugman. It is done by contrasting the image of refrigerators overflowing with fruits at the Patamkins, and Klugman's stealing of the fruits from the refrigerators. Even when he eats them with Brenda, he does so when the other members of the family are away. It is both a physical and a sexual theft: physically he steals fruits and sexually he steals pleasure from Brenda. The refrigerators overflowing with fruits symbolize the boundless energy and vitality of the Patamkins, especially the eroticism of Brenda. By contrast it shows the frustration and lack of vigor in Klugman and his deep need to acquire it. Ultimately, Klugman is not able to realize his love for Brenda as he finds that she is not willing to conform to his ideas totally. Brenda herself is a headstrong woman and though she yields to him in the beginning, she is not willing to accept his domination. Willfully, she exposes their sexual rendezvous to her family and decides to break up the affair. Klugman finds that the grapes are sour.

In *Portnoy's Complaint* we find that Portnoy behaves likewise. When Portnoy loses his beloved he feels like an "empty refrigerator" (PC, p. 229). David Kepesh's refrigerator is empty too except for a solitary lemon in it. Both Portnoy and Kepesh seek to overpower others and find they are left all alone. In *Letting Go*, the image of the refrigerator becomes sharper. It is directly associated with the turning on and off of sexual activity. It points to the technological nature of urban existence and represents the sale and purchase of relationships (refrigerators are sold and bought). The imagery of the refrigerator symbolizes emptiness in the lives of the protagonists. In other words, it points to the predatory nature of inter-personal relationship that is quickly destroyed when the season's fruits are eaten.

### **Loneliness in an American City**

The sense of loneliness that follows in the wake of a divorce or ruptured love is intensified by the fragmented nature of city life where individuals invariably keep to themselves. It seeks expression in the protagonist in his fragmented way of thinking and the intense longing for companionship. Peter Tarnopol's emotional immobilization by Maureen is complicated and heightened by the impersonal nature of city life. Tarnopol is speechless when he stands at the lectern to speak on "the art of fiction" at a Brooklyn College creative writing workshop. His feeling of loneliness and sense of failure is activated by the impersonal nature of his audience. He admits afterwards that he felt disembodied and fragmented. "I was nothing but heart-beat, just that drum" (MLM, p. 102). At other times he feels like a wounded man, "manuscript in hand," dragging himself "around the little room, like some burdened figure, broken loose from Rodin's 'Bourgeois of Calais' crying aloud..." (MLM, p. 104).



These symptoms get complicated with others like paranoia, and transform him into a female breast. David Kepesh in *The Professor of Desire* also exhibits symptoms of disembodiment and loneliness while he lives in New York City. With Kepesh the sense of loneliness and feeling of disembodiment become permanent features of his thought. It is worth noting that even when he talks of his losses he uses negative words to convey them. He describes himself in negative words after the disquiet of his divorce. He speaks of his body as a “benumbed and unsexed carcass” and his emotional condition as “womanless, pleasureless, painless” (POD, p. 149). He cries before his bathroom mirror for human company and feels slightly relieved when his parents come to his New York hotel apartment. However, the company of his loquacious father exasperates him and he describes him as a man with an “unstoppable” mouth (POD, p. 247).

Similarly, upon the restoration of his psychological health in the company of Claire, Kepesh describes his condition, again as “unbewitchable” (POD, p. 207). The use of newly coined words indicates that there is a new reality perceived by the protagonists, and for its expression a new language is required; the old has its own connotations, which they do not accept anymore. This is the impact of the protean life-style on their language.

### **Narcissism and Nice Boy Syndrome**

As already stated the destruction of the love relationship is directly linked to the narcissistic trait in the personality of the protagonist. Perhaps, the origins of narcissism can be found in the suppression of the sexual impulse during childhood. In fact, the sexual impulse that was “feverish,” “flamboyant,” and “bizarre” during the childhood of the protagonist becomes an issue in adult life. This is true of characters like Nathan Zuckerman and Alexander Portnoy who become the author’s alter ego and interlocutor. Both seek approval, and gain acceptance of their “doting [Jewish] parents.” They do this by playing the role of ingratiatingly “nice civilized Jewish boy[s] with some talent and some brains” (MLM, p. 189).

At times when these young Jewish boys are not nice to their parents they are punished to conform. When they conform, they are praised and even lionized. For example, his father punishes young Nathan for his illegible signature in “Salad Days.” Afterwards, when he learns to sign legibly, his signature is framed and nailed to the wall by his father in his shop. Portnoy’s childhood is no different from Nathan’s. At times, Portnoy is scolded for his misbehavior but at others he is “carried around the house like a Pope through the streets of Rome” (PC, p. 91).

The effect of trying to play the role of a nice Jewish boy affects the protagonist’s emotional and sexual life to a great extent. On the one hand, he controls his wild impulses to please his parents, and on the other, he satisfies those impulses, in the privacy of the bedroom or bathroom. Portnoy after being a nice boy to his parents satisfies his sexual needs by masturbating in the privacy of the bathroom. Similarly, young Kepesh reads ribald and obscene letters sent by Bratasky from New York in the bedroom. Portnoy’s confession to his psychiatrist epitomizes the suppressed childhood of most characters:

‘Oh my secrets, my palpitations, my flushes, my sweats! The way I respond to the simple vicissitudes of human life! Doctor,—I can’t stand anymore being frightened like this over nothing! Make me whole! Enough being a nice Jewish boy publicly pleasing my

parents while privately pulling my putz! Enough!' (PC, p. 40).

In the *Sabbath's Theater* Roth takes the reader beyond Portnoy's sexual pranks into a dark world of psychological disease and perverted sex.<sup>xxviii</sup> The protagonist Mickey Sabbath, a prototypical 'dirty old man' and modeled on the Jewish painter R.B. Kitaj, is a disgraced puppeteer. Mickey manipulates women the way he would have manipulated his puppets to derive satisfaction. When he loses his adulterous companion Drenka his world is shattered. As he contemplates suicide he remembers the advice of his dead mother's ghost that it would be the most fitting tribute to a failed life.<sup>xxix</sup>

### **Experiences of an Erotic Childhood**

The world these persons create during their childhood is erotic in content where objects acquire sexual meaning and masturbation or sexual activity has unforeseen consequences.<sup>xxx</sup> The case of Portnoy is an excellent example.

The ginger-ale glass that touched his mother's lips, his sister Hannah's soiled brassiere, his mother's slender waist, her accidental menstruation blood on the kitchen floor, the kitchen knife pointed at him by her—all become objects that acquire sexual meanings for him. He masturbates and his acts of masturbation bring with it the fear of discovery and of physical defect; at the same time, he tries to live up to the good boy image he has built for himself.

He simply cannot—*will not*—control the fires in his putz, the fevers in his brain, the desire continually burning within for the new, the wild, the undreamt of (PC, p. 113).

He stands for most characters in Roth's fiction. He also bears a close resemblance to Bruce Jay Friedman's protagonist, Joseph, in *A Mother's Kisses*.<sup>xxxi</sup>

The protagonist hopes to escape the childhood world of sexual suppression as he grows up. However, instead of growing out of it he replaces it with promiscuity. In other words, in his adult life he overturns the world of childhood fears and repression. For instance, instead of considering objects used or worn by women as possessing sexual qualities, Portnoy considers their person as voluptuous. Since in America promiscuity is tolerated as a fact of adult life-style, the protagonist is able to satisfy his desires without violating the prohibitions of childhood. Now, the archetypal quest for self-definition and satisfaction of private desires can be met simultaneously.

In both, childhood and adult life, the protagonist implicitly believes that desires cannot be controlled and will seek an outlet. He feels the pain in the present because the incongruity of the present is felt strongly when seen in retrospect. He finds that his present failures are primarily due to his childhood repression; therefore, it is not so much the past that he is dissatisfied with as with the present.

In this new light the Jewish mother, who is remembered as sweet natured and beautiful, is turned into a Jewish she-monster. The changed image of the mother disturbs the Jewish protagonist when he starts believing her to be the primary cause of his inability to relate meaningfully with women. Portnoy raves against his mother who is to him the archetypal Jewish mother:

BECAUSE WE CAN'T TAKE ANYMORE! BECAUSE YOU FUCKING MOTHERS ARE JUST TOO FUCKING MUCH TO BEAR! (PC, p. 136).

However, Portnoy has his doubts. He wonders if he should really believe that his mother has exercised a pernicious influence over him during childhood, which is responsible for his present malady.

As far as Portnoy can remember his childhood has been nothing but good and his mother indulgent. Portnoy wonders:

Could I have really detested my childhood and resented these poor parents of mine to the same degree then as I seem to now, looking backward upon what I was from the vantage point of what I am—and am not? Is this truth I'm delivering up, or is it just plain *kvetching*? Or is *kvetching* for people like me a *form* of truth? Regardless, my conscience wishes to make it known, before the beefing begins anew, that *at that time* my boyhood was not this thing I feel so estranged from and resentful of now. Vast as my childhood confusion was, deep as my inner turmoil seems to appear in retrospect, I don't remember that I was one of those kids who went around wishing he lived in another house with other people, whatever my unconscious yearnings may have been in that direction. (PC, pp. 105–6)

Being a protean man Portnoy finds his complaining a “form of truth.” He realizes that his complaint is a way of stabilizing himself in the flux of time. Unless he confesses and tells it to others he is not able to concretize his personality.

Similarly, Peter Tarnopol doubts whether his mothers' influence was good or harmful. Peter Tarnopol wonders, during a discussion with his psychiatrist, whether his mother's influence is responsible for his sexual and psychological setbacks in the present. He says,

My argument with this line, the doctor began to take on my past was that if I had suffered anything serious from having had a mother like my own it was because she had nourished in me a boundless belief in my ability to *win* whatever I wanted; an optimism and innocence about my charmed life that (now that I thought about it) could very well have left me less than fortified against the realities of setback and frustration (MLM, p. 215).

In truth, the resentment is against his own protean self, though it is directed against his mother.

### **The Influence of the Dominating Jewish Mother**

The Jewish mother develops in the protagonist the sense of youthful “innocence” and a “boundless belief” that he can “win” anything that he wants. This belief becomes detrimental to adult interpersonal relations. The failure to get what he wants builds in him the resentment against her. For instance, Portnoy befriends a woman lieutenant in Israel and feels impotent with her in his hotel room. Later, he blames the childhood memory of his mother wielding a kitchen knife at him responsible for the onset of his impotence with the *sabra* woman. On another occasion, he meets a redheaded girl, Naomi, whom he associates with his redheaded mother. He wants to have sex with her because she reminds him of his mother. As he tries to force her to

submit (reversal of roles) she kicks him and walks away. His resentment builds up as woman after woman leaves him till he thinks that all women, including his mother, are dumb as cows (PC, pp. 109–10). The resentment against his mother is in fact resentment at his failure in life. It shows a marginal awareness of his protean personality.

The chimera-like figure of the Jewish mother, that the hero conjures up whenever he is down and out, is another symptom of his formless protean personality. The formlessness is reflected in his undecided state and the difficulty he finds in choosing. The state of physical and existential indecision is accentuated by the vastness of the city. Here he can neither gain a complete view of the city nor decide where to go or what to do. Hence, he certainly cannot analyze the factors that shape his personality. Gabe Wallach cannot decide whether to go to his father's wedding and buy a present for him, or to stay with his beloved Martha Reganhart and marry her, or to go to Libby and converse with her. He goes out driving in New York and chooses one-way intersection in his state of indecisiveness, because he admits that he was "not sure you see, about anything" (LG, p. 489). Finally, he goes out in New York City to buy a wedding present for his father but instead comes back with a gift for Libby's adopted daughter, Rachel. Incidentally, by buying a present for Rachel he celebrates the child in him instead of the mature man. As the protean state involves a childhood curiosity about the world Gabe Wallach in a way chooses the protean life-style rather than the conventional that is embodied in his father.

In his typical environment the protean man finds it difficult to make and maintain connections between a melange of ideas and images once they enter his inner cosmic space. Alfred Kazin, for instance, finds Roth's novels full of "moral lucidity and compactness."<sup>xxxii</sup> It is true that Roth's novels have certain "compactness" about them but in my opinion they do not possess "moral lucidity." Roth intends to paint a canvas with a large number of metaphors and ideas that are popularized by the mass media. Roth also points out the difficulty urban man has in translating and synthesizing new events and images during his encounters with them. In other words, Roth presents the absurdity of the urban world, once it has penetrated the inner cosmic space of man. Roth himself writes, "The actuality is continually out-doing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist. Who, for example, could have invented Charles Van Doren? Roy Cohn and David Schine? Sherman Adams and Bernard Goldfine? Dwight David Eisenhower?"<sup>xxxiii</sup>

The new experiences that urban reality "tosses up" daily become difficult both for the novelist and his characters to synthesize. It is especially true of the protagonists under tension, be it failure in love, as it is with Portnoy, or a traumatic divorce, as it is with Tarnopol. In such moments they find they cannot make connections between one event and another or between one idea and another: their inner cosmic space becomes absurd. They, like Gabriel Wallach (LG, p. 44), feel that some event may or may not have taken place, depending upon the way one sees it.

When his inner space turns absurd, the protean man feels, as Peter Tarnopol does, "*confused and incredulous much of the time*" (MLM, p. 100). He becomes obsessed with trying to interpret events that have occurred in his life. In other words, the past requires clarification; and rational inquiry is the only weapon to analyze events. Therefore, rational inquiry becomes the preoccupation not only of the protagonist but also of the novel. The crystallization of pain in

the past and an anxiety of its continuance in the future become central to the protean consciousness. The protagonist finds that only through confessing or expressing it he can structure events and locate himself in them. In this way he is also able to assuage his absurd vision of the past. For instance, the introduction to the second section of *My Life as a Man* states the issue clearly. Peter Tarnopol writes his “*autobiographical narrative*” to understand his traumatic past and by this act to exorcise “*his obsession once and for all.*” In this brief introduction, written in the authorial third-person voice, we are informed that Tarnopol is suffering from the shock of his broken marriage with Maureen Johnson “*and on the subject of the late Mrs. Tarnopol he continues to be a man possessed.*” Diagnosed by his psychiatrist as “*among the top young narcissists in the art,*” Tarnopol sets out to “*demystify the past and mitigate his admittedly uncommendable sense of defeat*” with renewed vigor (MLM, pp. 100–101).

### **Demystifying the Past—Psychiatrists and Women**

In the novels of Roth, psychiatrists and women serve the same function. The twin functions are to “demystify” the past and to concretize the personality of the protagonist, the former in reflection and the latter in action and interaction. Both help the protagonist to define himself in society. In a woman’s bed he seeks experience; on the psychiatrist’s couch he distills the essence of that experience. He would fail in his role as an intellectual and a protean man if he did not conceptualize or confess. Most novels are recorded in the form of confessions before the psychiatrist. For example, *Portnoy’s Complaint* and *My Life as a Man* are confessions before the psychiatrist, Dr. Otto Spielvogel. At times the protagonist rebels against the professional and authoritative tones of others especially Jewish religious leaders, parents or psychiatrists. Through the tone of travesty he rejects the tones of authority and righteousness that he finds meaningless. In *My Life as a Man* Tarnopol’s first-person narration, describing his professional and personal deterioration in the wake of his marital crisis, is intermixed with a tone of travesty. Only through mockery of others and institutions and self-mockery can he confront that period of life. Tarnopol says,

And the work, I thought, was beginning to show it. At least there was beginning to *be* work that I did not feel I had to consign because it was so bad to the liquor carton at the bottom of the closet. In the previous year I had completed three short stories: one had been published in the *New Yorker*, one in *Kenyon Review*, and the third was to appear in *Harper’s*. They constituted the first fiction of mine in print since the publication of *A Jewish Father* in 1959. The three stories, simple though they were, demonstrated a certain clarity and calm that had not been the hallmark of my writing over the previous years; inspired largely by incidents from boyhood and adolescence that I had recollected in analysis, they had nothing to do with Maureen and the urine and the marriage. [On] *That* book, based upon my misadventures in manhood, I still, of course, spent maddening hours everyday, and I had some two thousand pages of manuscript in the liquor carton to prove it.... You have turned art into an outlet for passion, a kind of chamberpot to catch an overflow. It smells bad; it smells of hate! (MLM, pp. 238–8)

The seriousness of his marriage with and his painful divorce from Maureen are described with a tone of self-mockery: “Maureen and the urine and the marriage.” It helps him to live with the experience; and it also establishes his protean credentials. The tone of travesty, as stated earlier, is Roth’s own way of discrediting the authoritative and self-righteous tones of people like Rabbi Marvin Binder in the short story “The Conversion of the Jews” and of Dr. Spielvogel in *My Life as a Man*. In the former case, by threatening suicide from the roof of a school, Ozzie Freedman compels Rabbi Binder to fall upon his knees, together with the entire crowd, and humiliates him. While in the latter Peter Tarnopol’s argument with Dr. Spielvogel, over his misrepresentation of an article in a psychiatric journal, satirizes the authoritative professional tone of Dr. Spielvogel. Dr. Spielvogel says about the controversy that,

‘... there is nothing more to be said about it. We have discussed it now for a week. We have been over it thoroughly. there is nothing new to add.’ ‘You couldn’t add that you were wrong,’ I have answered the charge already and more than once. I don’t find anything that I did ‘wrong’ (MLM, p. 248).

The stubbornness of Dr. Spielvogel, even to apologize for his maligning article, is evident in his tone of moral earnestness. He uses it most effectively to cover his own mistake.

### **Tone of Travesty**

Nevertheless, the tone of travesty, whether used by the protagonist to confront the past or by the author to expose self-righteousness, betrays itself on occasions. At times it becomes weak, and remains only a pretense, till it finally culminates in a spasmodic sob. In such a state, the protagonist becomes a prey to the same self-righteous tone that he parodies. For instance, the closing section of *Portnoy’s Complaint* (PC, pp. 307–8) begins by satirizing an imaginary judge who is bent upon convicting Portnoy for his sexual crimes against women. It suddenly becomes angry and then turns self-righteous in tone. Portnoy inquires after the judge “‘Why, damn it, can’t I have some *fun*: Why is the smallest thing I do for pleasure immediately illicit—while the rest of the world rolls laughing in the mud!’” The tone turns insinuating and angry until finally it ends in a spasmodic and long-drawn sob. Portnoy cries at the end of the novel,

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This trait is most prominent in *Portnoy’s Complaint* though it is present in other novels too.

The tone of travesty seeks expression through the behavior of the protagonist, especially in his act of rejecting moral propriety. He obliterates the margin between public and private behavior and in this way makes the private public.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

“It’s in the nature of being a novelist to make the private life public—that’s a part of what a novelist is up to,” argues Peter Tarnopol about his own fiction with Dr. Spielvogel. In a way it is true not only of Tarnopol but of other fictional characters as well. The revelation of intimate detail, performance of obscene sexual acts in public, the practicing of secret sexual whims and other acts of masochism, perversion and voyeurism are some of the ways in which the protagonist crosses the private boundary and enters the public domain. Portnoy’s sexual acts in public with Mary Jane Reed, Tarnopol’s smearing of his semen on objects and his wearing of Maureen’s underwear are some of the acts in which characters exhibit this tendency. The revelation of intimate details in the novels is a way to express the uselessness of social propriety and also a method to be saved from the intellectual and emotional crisis that best the protagonists.

### **The Myth of Total Physical Gratification**

Usually Roth’s novels portray the recrudescence of love and the repeated estrangement the protagonist undergoes. Or, if sexual or romantic love matures into marriage, it invariably ends in divorce. In both case the protagonist has to regroup his resources through occasional psychiatric help and re-deploy his energies elsewhere. The constant shift of love relationships point to the shifting nature of the protean man as his personality undergoes change. For instance, in *The Professor of Desire* David Kepesh’s love affairs with the two Swedish girls end in estrangement, while his marriage with Helen Baird ends in divorce and dislocation. Afterwards, he seeks the love of Claire Ovington and the help of his psychiatrist to come out of his emotional disasters.

The belief that total physical gratification is the only gateway to happiness and well-being prompts the hero to relate with women on purely sexual terms. It ultimately turns into a payback relationship where each pays the other, either in material or non-material terms, for the sexual favors each receives from the other. This sort of relationship does not last long and leads to rupture or parting. For instance, Nathan Zuckerman (in *The Ghost Writer*) contemplates Amy Belle as an object of his “ignoble expectations” (GW, p. 40). Zuckerman reasons with himself and tries to justify his desire for Amy by believing that “it is not our high purposes alone that make us moving creatures but our humble needs and cravings” (GW, p. 21). Similarly, Peter Tarnopol willingly accepts any woman as “a masturbatory sexual object” (MLM, p. 242). Perhaps, he acts out “his anger in his relationship with women” (MLM, p. 242). The anger is the effect of his inability to hold on to a relationship for long or to commit himself to a woman.

The inference that women are sexual objects to be used and thrown away is strengthened by the degrading position most women occupy in Roth’s fiction. They are invariably conceived as Yahoos or Brobdignagian she-monkeys. For example, Mary Jane Reed in *Portnoy’s Complaint* is nicknamed “Monkey” whereas in *The Ghost Writer* Nathan finds Betsy’s face, the girl he briefly falls in love with, as “the small unpainted she-monkey face” (GW, p. 35). In other words, such women are creatures of instinct and impulse and do not satisfy the intellectual protagonist, though they provide sexual pleasure till the affair lasts.

The purely sexual slant of the protagonist’s love life is also evident in his choice of women

—women with substantial breasts. For instance, women like Elizabeth Elverskog, Birgitta Svansson, Claire Ovington, Martha Reganhart and others possess substantial breasts. The infatuation of Roth's archetypal protagonist with breasts become a fetish, so much so that in a Kafkesque way David Kepesh is transformed into a breast. Mary Reed laments about Portnoy's search for substantial breasts, "All you ever talk about and think about is tits! *Other people's tits* ... so you finally get a pair that are tremendous, and what do you do, Nothing!" (PC, p. 55).

The search for the breast becomes like the search for the Holy Grail, a movement back in time. It is a regression to a time when the protagonist did not distinguish between his mother's breast and his own body. During adult life he is attracted toward breasts, as he wants to understand himself and the cause of his immediate crisis. However, the search is carried too far in the Kafkesque novel *The Breast*.

As sex is the primary ingredient that makes any love relationship possible in Roth's novels, it takes extreme forms, especially perversion, voyeurism, and masochism. The protagonists are not willing to marry their sexual partners. Hence, on the issue of marriage they exhibit anxiety though they find no trouble in having sex with them. For instance, Portnoy indulges in perverted sexual acts with a whore, but he is not willing to marry her. "What I thought (this'll amuse you), what I thought wasn't Do I love her? Or could I love her? Rather! Should I love her?" (PC, p. 223). In other words, he does not seek others' approval of his sex partners but he does of a marriage partner.

The intense sexual activity, that takes extreme forms in Roth's novels and is an attempt at keeping the interest of the partners alive often bores the protagonist and destroys the relationship. Just as David Kepesh is bored with Birgitta and Elizabeth, so is Nathan Zuckerman by the perky-breasted, jungle-eyed teenager Sharon Shatzky. Nathan feels that Sharon could "bury you in boredom" (MLM, p. 28); and most of Roth's protagonists would share Nathan's sentiment. In the other novels the story is repeated. Even the novel *When She was Good*, like *Letting Go*, deals with the boredom of living. Ihab Hassan thinks that the former novel deals also with "the banality of culture" that Roth experiences as a writer.<sup>xxxv</sup> Since this novel does not deal with Jewish issues it is not taken up for analysis in the present study.

The second category of relationship that the Jewish intellectual establishes with women is the inter-cultural type. He seeks the companionship and desires to possess *Wasp* females because through them he seeks to acquire their *Wasp* background. It is an attempt by him to get a toenail grip over the emotional terrain of America. The *shikse* or *Wasp* women also satisfy a psychological need in the Jewish hero. He discovers in her a social forum in which he could release his damned psychic energy. The *Sabra* or the Jewish woman is not able to provide this new cultural background as the protagonist considers the Hebraic tradition inadequate, and the *Sabra* represents that tradition. Portnoy tells his psychiatrist that he is interested more in the social background of the women he befriends than in a sexual relationship with them (PC, p. 265).

Portnoy finds the bourgeois *Wasp* background of Sarah Maulsby both compelling and enviable. She goes out for horse riding and bird shooting in the style reminiscent of Andrea Conover in Heller's novel *Good as Gold*. Portnoy, who is a middle-class Jew, confesses the way he feels about Sarah thus,



Intolerant of her frailties. Jealous of her accomplishments. resentful of her family. No, not much room there for love? (PC, p. 271).

The relationship is bound to fail and it ends in disaster.

Similarly, in the case of Nathan Zuckerman his affair with Lydia Kettner ends in incest and divorce. Zuckerman forgets Lydia's "blighted middle Western Protestant background" (MLM, p. 69) as he gets interested in Lydia's ten-year-old daughter Monica's "budding breasts." On finding this out Lydia commits suicide, as Zuckerman plans to elope with Monica to an idyll of love in Italy. Tarnopol's brother, Moe, sums up Peter's relationship with women, especially with his late wife Maureen and his beloved Susan McCall:

'First the lumpen proletariat now the aristocracy. What are you the Malinowski of Manhattan? Enough erotic anthropology ... . You're sticking your plug in the same socket' (MLM, p. 160).

### **Enduring Love, Marriage and Divorce**

In a way Moe speaks for the rest of Roth's characters and points out that enduring love cannot inhere in a strictly sexual game. The inability of the protagonists to make a serious commitment in love reveals their protean nature: love for them remains a sexual game, which they play with the *Wasp* women to acquire their culture.

The protagonist is also attracted to the Jewish women who have an intellectual bent of mind, who are cultured, who pose a challenge, and are hard-to-get. Such women meet the need for challenge and intellectual stimulation in the protagonist. The attitude points to his narcissism and his desire to overpower others. For instance, Martha Reganhart who is an independent woman poses a challenge to young Gabe Wallach. Wallach goes after her with a relentless ferocity till finally she capitulates to his advances. However, Martha, a widow with two children, needs the social security for herself and her family that only a husband can provide. She is not interested in continuing a purely sexual relationship with Wallach. Wallach, on the other hand, is not willing to commit himself to her forever; nevertheless, he wants to retain her as his beloved. The devious turns their relationship takes, and its accompanying oscillation, show Wallach's anxiety when making a decision in favor of marriage—it represents the anxiety of a protean man. Finally, the relationship ends in estrangement and Martha reluctantly gives herself up to her old admirer, Sidney Jaffe. In other words, whether the relationship is primarily sexual or intellectual, it invariably ends in failure once the purchase is consumed. The protean man is obviously governed by the consumerist ethic.

When Roth's characters marry, the marriage certainly ends in a long drawn-out and painful divorce. This happens when they discover marriage to be routine or the woman boring through daily contact. In novels like *The Professor of Desire* and *My Life as a Man* we find that married life, not based on care and compromise, ends in divorce. Since the characters are protean they are not able to fulfill the long-range commitments they make at the start of their marriage. In due course, they seem to grow out of it as their personalities change; this change leads to marital conflicts. For instance, Peter Tarnopol is maddened with the sense of boredom that entails living on and on with Maureen. He says "'With Maureen it was the relentless *sameness* of the struggle

that nearly drove me mad ... ” (MLM, p. 167). As his dissatisfaction and boredom with his wife grow, he seeks emotional shelter from Karen Oakes and sexual release in Susan McCall. When Maureen comes to know that Tarnopol is away seeking extra-marital contacts, she wants to know why he is unfaithful to her,

‘Oh, why do you punish me like this—why do you lust after every woman in this whole wide world except your own wife’ (MLM, p. 121).

In a way she underlines the promiscuous trait in Roth’s male character. The injunction also points to the failure of women like Maureen and Helen to act out the role of a wife. These women may be great lovers in bed but they do not combine feminine elegance and efficiency in home affairs; they are not cut out for that. Mostly, these women bring with them a troubled past, specially a divorce, and it becomes a barrier in marital happiness. In *The Professor of Desire*, even after Helen marries Kepesh, she continues to cherish the memory of her ex-lover, Jimmy Metcalf. Before their marriage, Kepesh doubts whether “it is in fact I whom she will marry and not the barrier I may seem to be against the past whose loss had very nearly killed her” (POD, p. 66).

Once marriage turns sour, it becomes claustrophobic and begins to suffocate the protean protagonist compelling him to seek a quick release from it. The imagery of suffocation is repeated in the novels to demonstrate the coming-down experience as he struggles “up for air in the dark sea of maladjustment” (LG, p. 297). For instance, Peter Tarnopol feels that he is entrapped in his marriage with Maureen. This may recall the wounded image of a man dragging himself. Tarnopol feels entrapped because he finds that Maureen would neither give him divorce nor leave him alone (MLM, p. 269).

In turn, the women feel that they have not received proper attention and love but only material goods. They demand more material goods as evidence of the man’s continuous love for them even when they continue to feel deprived. The protagonist acquiesces but develops a deep-seated resentment toward women. The marriage of Kepesh with Helen in *The Professor of Desire* amply demonstrates this situation. Kepesh has never given his complete love to Helen because he always thought that their relationship was self-serving. He only gave her financial assistance. Helen’s need to be loved and cared for expresses itself in the form of careless acts that make Kepesh angry. She would burn the toast, forget to post letters, leave cheques unsigned, and the garbage on the staircase (POD, p. 68). Later she admits that she did these things on purpose as she had begun to hate him “with all her heart” (POD, p. 71). Both partners are left emotionally exhausted and empty.

### **Collapse of Relationship and the Coming-Down Experience**

The feeling of exhaustion and emptiness is a recurrent theme in Roth's fiction and is expressed in the desire to seek comfort and love elsewhere. Kepesh desires to adopt the beautiful girl-student Kathie: Peter Tarnopol wishes to marry Karen Oakes. In truth Karen Oakes, the girl in Tarnopol’s class, is the type of girl Roth’s protagonists are always interested in after the failure of their marriage. This girl is the beautiful, innocent, intelligent and cool-headed sort—a person who is “so uncrazy and so much your own person” (MLM, p. 231). In *The*

*Professor of Desire*, Roth finds for Kepesh this type of woman in Claire Ovington. Claire promises to be what Helen could not be, that is, his muse. Where Helen lamented, “I could be his Muse, if only he’d let me,” Claire claims the privilege. However, between the woman’s leaving the protagonist and his finding another, he feels emasculated.

On the departure of the *shikse* the protagonist feels emasculated as he feels that somehow he has been betrayed. It is a re-enactment of the Hebraic legend of Samson and Delilah. Peter Tarnopol’s case explicates the psychological position of most characters. When Maureen departs he feels emasculated and afterwards fights a legal battle for a divorce to get his manhood back. As he puts it to Susan, he engages in a legal battle with Maureen to get his “balls back” (MLM, p. 318).

Not prepared to share the burden of life alone, he realizes the sudden blurring of focus after the divorce. It results in his emotional dislocation and sexual unmaning.

The destruction of the man-woman relationship becomes an extraordinarily powerful metaphor for the process of coming-down from the peak experience. It raises the complex issue of how to relate the energy released by the peak experience. Mostly, characters are not able to reconcile the transcendent experience of peak moments with the mundane experience of daily existence. While looking for a shortcut to happiness, the protagonists are easily exasperated with each new relationship as it does not come up to their expectations and they find themselves suddenly at a dead end.

### **Compromise and Happiness**

Few of these protagonists have an intuition that enduring happiness is grounded in compromise. For instance, in *The Ghost Writer*, Nathan Zuckerman feels that the peak experience he reaches during a creative act of writing fiction is cruelly cut short by social responsibility and social norms. He finds that the “intrigue and adventure” of a creative endeavor is “extinguished by the ruling triumvirate of Sanity, Responsibility, and Self-Respect” and the “devoted underlings: the time-tables, the rainstorm, the headache, the busy signal, the traffic jam” (GW, p. 15). In Roth’s earlier fiction, *Letting Go* and *Portnoy’s Complaint*, there is no attempt to bring together the two experiences. In *Portnoy’s Complaint* there is an awareness of the compromise that one could make and find happiness but Portnoy is not yet ready for it. He says,

Yes I have to ask myself (as the airplane carries me—I believe—away from my tormentor), what has become of my purposes, those decent and worthwhile goals? Home? I have none. Family? No! Things I could own just by snapping my fingers... . So why not snap them then, and get on with my life? No, instead of tucking in my children and lying down beside a loyal wife (to whom I am loyal to [sic], I have, on two different evenings, taken to bed with me—coinstantaneously, as they say in the whorehouse—a fat little Italian whore and an illiterate, unbalanced American mannequin. And that isn’t even my idea of a good time, damn it! What is? I told you! And I meant it—Sitting at home listening to Jack Benny with my kids! Raising intelligent, loving, sturdy children! Protecting some good woman! Dignity! Health! Love! Industry! Intelligence! Trust! Decency! High Spirits! Compassion! What the hell do I care about sensational sex? How can I be floundering like this over

something so simple, so *silly*, as pussy! (PC, p. 280)

Though Portnoy feels that happiness is grounded in having a “family,” a “loyal wife,” and “children” he cannot take up that life for long. His protean nature comes in his way; even when he feels that he wants to have all these things, he cannot. Portnoy has not crossed from the protean into the operational stage. He wants to keep up the peak experience of sexual ecstasy with women, even with whores, and not come down from it. There is no attempt in the novel to bring the two stages together. Therefore, the bewilderment and pain of the hero are greater as each relationship comes to an end because he is unable to clearly comprehend his protean state.

Only in Roth’s later fiction, *The Professor of Desire* and *The Ghost Writer*, is there a movement toward reconciliation. But here too it is in its nascent stage. For instance Kepesh’s newfound happiness with Claire might be based on compromise yet it is a shaky one for toward the end of the novel Kepesh is troubled by dreams of separation and estrangement.

In *The Ghost Writer* the issue of compromise is carried forward in the person of Zuckerman’s mentor, E. I. Lonoff. There is only a suggestion of the direction the protagonist might take in future, but it remains only an unclear suggestion. In other words, the operational stage is not clearly defined here. At fifty-six, thinking about the possibility of his death Lonoff wishes to snatch some pleasure with a young Jewish woman of thirty-five, Amy Bellete. He listens with great expectation to her suggestion of running away to Italy and staying together in conjugal bliss. But Lonoff is nagged by doubts whether he should cast off his aging wife for Amy: “You don’t chuck a woman out after thirty-five years because you’d prefer to see a new face over your fruit juice” (GW, p. 71), he reasons with himself. Finally, he decides to stay with his wife and look for renewed happiness with her. This is symbolized well in the final scene where Lonoff sets out to find a runaway wife. In a way, Lonoff inverts the myth of total sexual gratification and suggest that happiness of a permanent sort is grounded in compromise. It clearly suggests the maturing of the protean ethic and an entry into the operational life.

In *My Life as a Man* and *Professor of Desire*, Roth suggests the course that the life of the protagonist might take after he has suffered the pain and dislocation caused by divorce. There is a suggestion that only a woman who can generate trust and faith in the protean man can revitalize him—not only restore him back to health and happiness but also retain him on that correct course. A woman of this kind should also possess a certain innocence, spontaneity, and grace to achieve this end. However, this suggestion is advanced with a certain amount of skepticism because we know the changing nature of the protean man and his unwillingness to make long-range commitments.

In *The Professor of Desire*, Claire Ovington, the faithful and innocent schoolteacher, restores Kepesh back to emotional well being and physical health. In her care Kepesh reestablishes contact with the Schonbrums, takes up a wholesome accommodation in the city, stops his psychiatric treatment, withdraws from the harmful influence of the poet Baumgarten, and restarts his scholarly work on Anton Chekhov. In the beginning though there are lapses in his new life-style, as the past impinges upon him, he nearly comes out of his crisis. He revisits Venice and Austria to free himself of his sexual and psychological delusions; as he puts it, to get himself “de-Birgittized” and “de-Kafkaed” (POD, p. 178).

His intensely sexual relationship with Claire gradually settles down into a “quiet physical

affection” (POD, p. 99). He begins weighing the possibility of accepting social responsibility and to treat social obligations with respect. “Is there not a point on life’s way when one yields to duty, *welcomes* duty as once one yielded to pleasure, to passion, to adventure—a time when duty is the pleasure, rather than pleasure the duty...” (POD, p. 253). He thinks of marriage in the same way as Peter Tarnopol and Alex Portnoy do. Kepesh, like Tarnopol, thinks of marrying a trusting, faithful woman. “If and when I was ever to marry again it would have to be someone in whose wholeness I had abounding faith and trust” (MLM, p. 137). But being a protean man he fears weather his love for such a woman will endure. It is this skepticism, this “most loyal to all, the last minute doubt” that strikes an ominous note in his relationship. He cries out,

Oh, innocent beloved, you fail to understand and I can’t tell you. I can’t say it, not tonight, but within a year my passion will be dead. Already it is dying and I am afraid that *there is nothing I can do to save it*. And nothing that you can do. Intimately bound—bound to you as to no one else!—and I will not be able to raise a hand to so much as touch you ... unless first I remind myself being grafted and nurtured back toward something like mastery over my life. I will be without desire. Oh, it’s stupid! Idiotic! Unfair! To be robbed like this of you! *And this life I love and have hardly gotten to know!* And by whom? *It always comes down to myself* (Emphasis mine, POD, p. 261).

Kepesh knows that he will be bored soon with the wholesome relationship with Claire; he knows that the professor of desire will become a professor of aversion. He also knows that the fault lies in his protean personality, for “It always comes down to myself!” He knows from past experience that life with Claire had not been gratifying. Claire is the person with whom Kepesh is living when he conceives of himself as a female breast: the emotional strife begins to rip open their love for each other. In other words, when the protean man is unable to grasp the situation completely he cries out in surprise and pain, “The freak I am! Lover of no one and nothing! Unloved and unloving” (PC, p. 284). The half-perceived protean state becomes the cause for failure in love and marriage.

### **The Use of the Extended Family**

In order to assuage the anxiety, that his protean existence brings, Roth’s archetypal hero seeks the help of his parents, relations or friends. It is his last resort to structure his experience. Hence, he comes to the family for self-preserving reasons. On the surface one might think he goes to this haven to fraternize, but in truth he goes there to reorient himself. Here he seeks sympathy to assuage his pain. Afterwards he departs, unwilling to participate in the functions of the family.

During his marital crisis Peter Tarnopol seeks the help of his brother, Morris. The strongly emotional scene where Peter, estranged from his wife, breaks down in Morris’ apartment is a case in point. Morris comforts and gives him advice (MLM, pp. 105–6); but when the crisis is over, Peter forgets all about Morris. Similarly, Nathan Zuckerman seeks the help of E. I. Lonoff who is his surrogate father. Zuckerman is estranged from his real father over the publication of a story entitled “Higher Education” as he has portrayed the family in unflattering terms. Zuckerman is looking not only for a teacher but also for a man who could give “patriarchal

validation” to his ideas. He admits, “For I had come, you see, to submit myself for candidacy as nothing less than E. I. Lonoff’s spiritual son, to petition for his moral sponsorship and to win, if I could, the magical protection of his advocacy and his love” (GW, pp. 9–10). Like the dark Indian boy who wants Lonoff to adopt him so he can come to America, Zuckerman too seeks Lonoff’s adoption so he can discover his emotional America. However, Roth’s characters realize that they are protean men and ultimately they would be adrift on the sea of change. They have an intuition that they will remain alien to a life of stability and peace.

Some like Wallach and Portnoy go off to distant lands after their love or marriage end in disaster, but they discover that even there they are aliens. In other words, a disaster, whether in love or marriage, or even boredom, makes the protagonists escape from the present environment. They either go to unknown lands to enter into more relationships and reap more bitter harvests, or go back to the parental home, where there is harmony, peace and love. But these things are only momentary as they are not willing to participate in that life. There is no final solution to the dilemma of their changing personalities and their attempt to find enduring relationships. In Roth’s novels though the solution is repeatedly suggested through the philosophy of compromise, it is rarely adopted.

### **A New Urban Behavior**

Seen from an orthodox point of view, the behavior of an average hero appears eccentric and at times, even mad. But howsoever mad it might seem, it gives us an understanding of the new urban behavior that has emerged out of the ruins of a rootless society—irrespective of the fact whether this society was Hebraic or Christian.<sup>xxxvi</sup> At times it might become the *Duren Phantasien*, or the fantasy prohibited in real life to the author, but mostly it expresses the failure of rituals and socialized gestures in the life of the protagonist. As the protagonist cannot find an expression for his personal attitudes in social gestures, he tries to forge new ones, either consciously or unconsciously. Often his actions are frantic as his thoughts are in ferment.

Roth’s novels do not move beyond the protean state of ferment that protagonists find themselves in. We are not sure of their development in the future but within the novels themselves there are certain hints of the direction the protean protagonists would take. Those characters that have experienced failure in their lives become self-critical, humble, and are willing to understand others. However, the awareness is still in its infancy. In *My Life as a Man*, Nathan Zuckerman, who is the fictional hero of “Salad Days” of the fictional author Peter Tarnopol, prophesies that he will learn to be humble in future. He says, about himself that,

He would begin to pay ... for the vanity and the ignorance, to be sure but above all the contradictions: the stinging tongue and the tender hide, the spiritual aspirations and the lewd desires, the softly boyish needs and the manly, the magisterial ambitions. Yes, over the next decade of his life he was to learn all that his father might have wished Dale Carnegie to teach him about humility, and then some. And then some more (MLM, pp. 30–1).

Perhaps, in *The Ghost Writer*, Nathan Zuckerman does acquire the Carnegian humility as he waits in all his “vanity” and “ignorance,” and “contradictions” and watches his object of infatuation, Amy Bellele, leave for college in her Renault, and his possible “guru” Lonoff in

search of his wife. If we do not go by the deception of the writer who goes to quite some length to show that *The Ghost Writer* is not a sequel to *My Life as a Man* and that the two Nathan Zuckermans are different, we will understand that the Zuckerman of *My Life as a Man* has matured into the Nathan Zuckerman of *The Ghost Writer*.

### Operational Men

Some characters, other than the protagonist, who have crossed the boundary of vanity, “magisterial ambitions,” and have also witnessed failure in their lives, are given important roles in the novels. They become minor counterpoints to the protean personality of the protagonist. Such characters have acquired humility and fortitude to live in the dislocation and contradictions of life. They understand themselves and live better, expect less from others and their surrounding. These are the operational men who are well adjusted to the urban society and can operate in it effectively.

These operational men retain their protean individualities and yet are humble and understanding. For instance, in *Letting Go*, Uncle Ascher, the aging artist, is aware of the world where change and multiplicity are the twin norms, expectation a foolish creed, and confrontation of death ennobling. “Let it flow, let it go. Wait and accept and learn to pull back the hand away. *Don't clutch,*” he advises Paul Herz about human relationships (LG, p. 83). Knowing this he maintains a tender relationship with his beloved Patricia Ann. Though he knows that every organism moves in the direction of self-preservation, he confronts death in order to live better. He goes to the funeral of Paul's father where Paul is not willing to go himself. “Funerals,” he says, “give a sharper edge to myself. In a funeral yard I often arrive at further refinements in my quest for self-understanding” (LG, p. 447).

Similarly, in *The Professor of Desire* poet Baumgarten acts out the role of an operational man. Though Baumgarten play-acts in the campus, and seduces adolescent girls in the streets of New York, he has a more serious side to his protean personality. He is aware of his “own imperatives” and meets his social obligations. He cares for his aging mother and financially supports his elder sister and her children. Even when he believes that virtue is a foolish thing he feels that meeting one's obligations in some areas is important. In *Goodbye, Columbus*, Uncle Leo promised to become such a character but Roth has not exploited the possibility: and Uncle Leo is left as a grumbling salesman only.

As already surmised, perhaps Philip Roth's intention in his novels is to delineate a typical protean protagonist who tries to repossess the artifacts of childhood through retrospection and imagination. He does so as he is goaded by strong emotions about incidents he is not very clear about. It is a process of re-enactment of his past and confirmation of his present. By this process he realizes his being. Roth recaptures the past by imagining it, and in this way he recreates a new one. “To repossess,”

Wright Morris points out, “we must imagine: our first memories are as dim as they are lasting. Until recorded history, memory constituted history and memory processed by emotion was our only means of repossession. When this is done with talent, we define it as art.”<sup>xxxvii</sup> Roth reconstitutes the life history of the protagonist with “talent” but his talent lies in the lyrical and metaphorical style and to a lesser degree in the pattern or rhythm of the novel. His plots are weak, as he does not give them proper attention.

Roth is able to deliver the message of his stories forcefully through his style. It is a serious, terse, and sinewy narrative style. It is a style of a learned man: mixed with it is the lyricism and self-mockery of experience. It expresses well the protean traits of his characters. In *The Ghost Writer*, Roth employs long and complicated sentences that have allusions to literary figures like Kafka, James and Chekhov. It is a style similar to that of *The Professor of Desire*, though more elaborately done. However, in his earlier fiction lyricism, poetry, nostalgia, and self-mockery are most intense. It is in these novels, *Portnoy's Complaint*, and *Goodbye, Columbus* he is at his best.

In *Portnoy's Complaint*, the tranquil and no-nonsense prose of the section entitled "THE MOST UNFORGETTABLE CHARACTER I'VE MET" (Where Portnoy describes the childhood memory of his mother) becomes angry and self-mocking in "WHACKING OFF." In another section entitled, "THE JEWISH BLUES," the style acquires a nostalgic and troubled quality that leaps up into the poetic cadence of the next section. The poetic cadences and the raciness of the prose can be seen from the passage that describes young Portnoy's childish pranks and his chastisement by his mother:

But then why is she shouting at him so, what is this scene of accusation and denial, of castigation and threat and unending tears ... . What is this all about except that he has done something that is very bad and may be even unforgivable. The scene itself is like some piece of heavy furniture that sits in my mind and will not budge—which leads me to believe that, yes, it actually did happen. My sister, I see, is hiding behind my mother: Hannah is clutching her around the middle and whimpering, while my mother's own tears are tremendous and fall from her face all the way to the linoleum floor. Simultaneously with the tears she is screaming so loud at him that her veins stand out—and screaming at me, too, because, looking further into this thing, I find that while Hannah hides behind my mother, *I take refuge behind the culprit myself*. Oh, this is pure fantasy, this is right out of the casebook is it not? No, no that is nobody's else's father but my own who now brings his fist down on the kitchen table and shouts back at her, 'I did no such thing! That is a lie and wrong! Only wait a minute—it's *me* who is screaming 'I didn't do it! *The culprit is me!* And why my mother weeps so is because my father refuses to potch my behind, which she promised would be *potched* "and good," when he found out the terrible thing I had done (PC, p. 95).

Roth has just the emotion of guilt as the raw material out of which he imagines the entire episode and gives it a real touch. He gives flesh and blood to the emotion that sits on his mind like "some piece of heavy furniture" that will not budge from its place. The prose is poetic, urgent and charged with emotion and it provides authenticity to an otherwise hazy incident in Portnoy's mind: "What is this all about except that he has done something that is very bad and may be even unforgivable." Roth has been able to capture the absurdity of the entire event that the protagonist thinks may or may not have happened.

The tone of self-mockery is at its best here and expresses the protean trait of Portnoy aptly. In *The Ghost Writer* this style, along with the mocking tone, is missing; in it the sensual muscularity of his earlier work is absent.



There is no plot worth the name in Roth's novels; it is only through retrospection and meditation that the story moves. The loose plot proceeds through these two methods. By it Roth effectively catches the changing nature of the protean mind and personality. Hence, the pattern and rhythm in the novels acquire importance. Usually the novels are built around a single topic divorce or ruptured love—though in *The Ghost Writer* this is not there. Novels like *My Life as a Man* and *Letting Go*, center upon the topic of divorce and estrangement respectively. This being the case, the gestures sketched in the novels are of desperation, revenge or escape. In *Portnoy's Complaint* it is desperation leading to frantic actions and escape to Israel; in *The Professor of Desire* it is Kepesh's need to seek sexual reassurance in Claire; in short stories like "The Defender of the Faith" and "The Conversion of the Jews," it is revenge.

Only in the short story "Epstein" and the novel *The Ghost Writer* the emphasis shifts. In the former it is reconciliation and acceptance of man's foibles while in the latter it is tentative patience. The gestures are usually desperate because the situations in these novels are generally traumatic or violent. For instance, it is Maureen's accidental death in *My Life as a Man*, divorce in *The Professor of Desire*, ruptured love in *Goodbye, Columbus*, and a suicide attempt in the short story "Conversion of the Jews." It is through these gestures, that occupy the protagonists completely, that the novels are bound together and they acquire coherence. These gestures are repeated many times within the novels to strengthen the structure and give the desired rhythm to the narration. For example, in *Portnoy's Complaint*, a love affair-estrangement pattern is maintained. Its repetition leads to an angry crescendo expressed in the painful impotent scream of Portnoy.

Usually, in these novels, the story is told by the protagonist himself and the authorial point of view is rarely introduced. This method sharpens focus but in the process eliminates variety and multiplicity. We only know what the protagonist thinks, feels and sees. Alfred Kazin also feels that this sort of narrative gives Roth an opportunity "to act out traits, to 'become' someone by a different pattern."<sup>xxxviii</sup>

Through the first-person participant narration Roth is able to delineate the inner cosmic space of characters and the meaning or absurdity each finds within it, as the case may be. In other words, the narration moves according to the changes taking place in the inner cosmic space of the individual as artifacts and events impinge upon him. The confessional tone of the narration is often "tinged with self satire" (GW, p. 19).

### **The Doppelganger Narrative Technique**

At times, the first-person narration also contains an analytical and intellectual voice. This is the *doppelganger* or ghostly voice of the protagonist, who is also an intellectual and a creative artist. The narration achieves distance and reflects the intellectual nature of the narrator. For instance, in a hotel at Prague, David Kepesh sits composing a lecture that he proposes to deliver to his literature class in America. The narration that follows acquires an intellectual terseness and a force that is no longer emotional or doubtful:

As you may already have surmised—by my style of dress as easily as from the style of my opening remarks—the conventions traditionally governing the relationship between student and teacher are more or less those by which I have always operated, even during the

turbulence of recent years. I have been told that I am one of the few remaining professors who address students in the classroom as ‘Mr.’ and ‘Miss’ rather than by their given names. And however you may choose to attire yourself—in the getup of garage mechanic, panhandler, tearoom gypsy, or cattle hustler—I still prefer to appear before you to teach wearing a jacket and a tie... though, as the observant will record, generally it will be the same jacket and the same tie (POD, p. 182).

One of the shortcomings of the *doppelgänger* narration is that it does not provide enough credence and emphasis to what is stated. It is done either through the third-person authorial voice or the first-person mature narration. The authorial narration is only employed where the characters cannot distance themselves, when they are involved in the action of the scene portrayed. This is true especially in the short stories and in *Portnoy’s Complaint*. In “Epstein” and “The Conversion of the Jews” this is used to great advantage. The effects of Lou Epstein’s adultery at his home and the suicide attempt of Ozzie, are conveyed poignantly through this method. However, this does not provide room for self-mockery, which is carried through the first-person mature narration.

The satirical prose style in *The Professor of Desire*, especially in the first chapter describing Kepesh’s formative years, is made possible through the first-person narration. Kepesh can look back upon his association with Herbie Bratasky, his own play-acting in school, and other events of childhood with a sense of gentle comedy. At the same time he can retain his hold upon the seriousness of those events. Kepesh describes his activities as a boy. “He—the next me turns out to be a sober, solitary, rather refined young man devoted to European literature and languages” (POD, p. 12). Here Kepesh is able to see his childhood critically and even comically.

It is important to note that these different narrative voices, though given the credence of being part and different, are in fact one and the same. The ‘ring leader’ is the authorial I, the author himself, who makes fiction semi-autobiographical in nature. *My Life As a Man* explicates this idea fully. The first part of the novel is divided into two stories entitled “Salad Days” and “Courting Disaster;” both are stories of Nathan Zuckerman who is a fictional character created by Peter Tarnopol. Nathan is Peter’s *doppelgänger* self. In the second part, *My True Story*,” Peter is the narrator: he is making fiction out of a personal crisis, the divorce from his wife. Both the *doppelgänger* and ‘I’ protagonist voices merge with the voice of the real author, Philip Roth, himself. All three are one: the central event is the marital breakdown whether imagined or real. The emotion is of the author himself and it is his history. Peter Tarnopol, the fictional novelist created by Roth, admits that the ringleader is usually the author himself.

I realize now, as I entertain this idea, that the nonfiction narrative that—I’m currently working on might be considered just that: the ‘I’ owning up to its role as ringleader of the plot. If so, then after all testimony has been heard and a guilty verdict swiftly rendered, the conspirators will be consigned to the appropriate correctional institution (MLM, pp. 113–4).

The style reflects the role-changing nature of the author and ultimately expresses the protean content in the personalities of the protagonists.

It is this new protean personality, its ramifications and the problem such a personality raises that are brought out effectively in the fiction of Roth. It is a fiction that laughs in the face of insurmountable odds, which are the side effects of experimentation and changed surroundings. Roth has a great impact on the mind of the contemporary reader because the reader shares and experiences that environment; one cannot remain indifferent to it. Roth's fiction has is therapeutic in nature for the readers just as it is for his characters. The complaint has served its purpose.

### Acknowledgements

<sup>i</sup> The present paper was originally written as part of my doctoral dissertation entitled, "The Protean Life-Style of the Protagonist in Contemporary Jewish-American Fiction" and constituted the sixth chapter of the thesis. The chapter has since then been updated and modified but remains more or less the same in both content and style. I wish to express my thanks to Professors V. N. Arora, John G. Cawelti, Raymond Olderman, late Leslie A. Fiedler, late William Mulder and Ms. Donna Culpepper with whom I discussed many of these ideas and profited from their suggestions.

### Notes and References

- <sup>ii</sup> If Saul Bellow's fiction is more intellectual in content and theme, Philip Roth's is sensual in nature, but what is common to both is their ability to understand the nature of the protean man in all its ramifications. Both the writers are able to draw upon their urban experience and use it as material for their fiction: the fiction of both these writers is rooted in urban reality.
- <sup>iii</sup> Ihab Hassan, *Contemporary American Literature 1945–1972* (New York: Frederick Unger Publishing Co., 1973), p. 73.
- <sup>iv</sup> Alfred Kazin finds in Roth's fiction especially in *Portnoy's Complaint* profanation of Jewish parents and Jewish values. He believes that, "It was this emphasis on the unmentionable, Roth's gift for zany working out unusually inaccessible details of the most improbable climax, like Portnoy masturbating into a piece of liver, that was the farce element so necessary to Roth's anger. There was the calculated profanation of mother, father, the most intimate offices of the body—profanation by now altogether healthy to those therapeutized members of the professional middle class to whom everything about the body become, like the possibility of universal destruction through the Bomb, small talk at the dinner table" (p. 148). Probably, Kazin is somewhat embarrassed to see Portnoy's attempt to reconstitute himself through revealing intimate details from private life (Alfred Kazin, *Bright Book of Life* 1971. rpt; New Delhi: Allied Publishers, n.d. pp. 148–49.)
- <sup>v</sup> Allen Guttman, *The Jewish Writer in America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), p. 12.
- <sup>vi</sup> Leslie Fiedler, *To the Gentiles* (New York: Stein and Day, 1972), pgs. 186, and 122–3.
- <sup>vii</sup> Benjamin De Mott, remarks about contemporary Jewish writers, especially Philip Roth, that "To the fictionist (but perhaps not as obviously to the Jewish critic) the answer appears to be nowhere. Which is only to repeat that the label, poet of humiliation, is in no sense unsuitable for any of the younger Jewish novelists of present reputation. A catalog of these writers, with a note on the relevance of the label in each case can have at best only a limited validity—but it may at least testify to the frequency with which they set themselves the task of creating the totally mortified man" (p. 130). (Benjamin De Mott, "Jewish Writers in America," *Commentary*, 3, No. 2 [June

- 1979] p.130)).
- <sup>viii</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (1944; rpt. Delhi: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), p. 31.
- <sup>ix</sup> Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* (1967; rpt. New York: Bantam Books, 1970). All future references to the text are made from this edition and marked PG except where the novel is named: the references are incorporated in the body of the chapter.
- <sup>x</sup> Philip Roth, *Letting Go* (1961; rpt. London: Corgi Books, 1971). All future references to the text are made from this edition and marked as LG except where the novel is named; the references are incorporated in the body of the chapter.
- <sup>xi</sup> Philip Roth, *Reading Myself and Others* (1961; rpt. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), p. 120.
- <sup>xii</sup> In the 1970s Roth had experimented with political satire in his novel *Our Gang* and again in late 1990s he wrote the *American Pastoral* (1997) where he portrayed the life of Swede Levov whose daughter becomes a homegrown terrorists in the late 1960s. The virtuous father, once Newark athletics star, finds it hard to believe and come to terms with the tragedy that has befallen him. In *I Married a Communist* (1998). Roth explores the McCarthy era like E. L. Doctorow and in *The Human Stain* he grapples with the tropes of American identity politics in the 1990s. In *The Plot Against America* (2004) Roth re-imagines American history postulating if Charles A. Lindberg had become the US President in 1940. Roth presents a chilling picture of the United States negotiating with Hitler and starting its own anti-Semitic pogrom. Critics have praised the novel as one of Roth's finest works. See Jonathan Yardley, "Homeland Security," *Washington Post*, October 3, 2004. Yardley writes, "Philip Roth's huge, inflammatory, painfully moving new novel draws upon a persistent theme in American life: 'It can't happen here.' That's how we express our longing to believe that our ideals are too strong to be shoved aside by some cruder impulse, and our nagging fear that our democracy is too fragile to withstand assault by the muscle of fascism."
- <sup>xiii</sup> Philip Roth, *The Breast* (New York: Rinehart and Winston, 1972). All future references to the text are made from this edition and marked as B, except where the novel is named; the references are incorporated in the body of the chapter.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Philip Roth, "Jewishness and the Younger Intellectuals," *Commentary*, 31 (April 1961), p. 351.
- <sup>xv</sup> Philip Roth's three recent works *Everyman* (2006), *Exit Ghost* (2007) and *Indignation* (2008) deal with desire and death, alter ego, and the anxieties of a father about the future of his son.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Philip Roth, *My Life As a Man* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970). All future references to the text are made from this edition and marked as MLM, except where the novel is named: the references are incorporated in the body of the chapter.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979). All future references to the text are made from this edition and marked as GW, except where the novel is named; the references are incorporated in the body of the chapter.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976), pp. 7–14. The subsection of Chapter One entitled "The World of the Shtetl" deals with the "spiritual ties" Jews share with the Shtetl community and the insecurity of that world.
- <sup>xix</sup> E. H. Leelavathi Mosilamoni, "The Fiction of Jewish Americans: An Interview with Leslie Fiedler," *Southwest Review*, 64, No. 1 (Winter 1970), p. 47. Fiedler believes that Philip Roth has lost all links with the Old World. Fiedler concludes that, "his [Roth's] connections with the Old World—well, they simply don't exist at all." This is perhaps not true. Roth's links are there, though

he puts the Hebraic tradition to new uses.

<sup>xx</sup> Just as in fiction so also in real life, Roth is concerned about the vituperative criticism leveled against him by the Rabbinate on the fiction he has written since *Goodbye, Columbus*. It has deeply affected the nature of his writing and is strongly evident in *My Life As a Man* and *The Ghost Writer*. Evidently, *The Ghost Writer* is sadder and mellower in tone, and the style is less muscular than in his early novels. Probably, *The Ghost Writer* is an attempt at justification or reassertion of his position as a writer. For instance, the hurt Roth felt as a consequence of the criticism leveled against him by Jewish religious leaders is expressed through the protagonist, Peter Tarnopol in *My Life As a Man*. Peter Tarnopol (or Philip Roth) responds to the criticism of his fiction in this way: “‘As the history itself will testify, I happen to be more immune to shame or built for public exposure than the next burgher with shades on his bedroom windows and a latch on the bathroom door—indeed, maybe what the whole history signifies is that I am sensitive to nothing in all the world as I am to my moral reputation’” (MLM, p. 229). The persona wears thin and the passage reads more like a piece from Roth’s book of critical essays, *Reading Myself and Others*, than from his novel. Therefore, one should distinguish between Roth’s explanatory tone and his true fiction and not wrongly take the first as a sign of his religiosity.

<sup>xxi</sup> Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, p. 596. Howe has this to say about Roth: “Indeed, his importance in the development of American Jewish writing was that, finally, he seemed to be cut off from any Jewish tradition.” True, Roth has discredited the Jewish tradition but only in juxtaposition does he find excellence.

<sup>xxii</sup> Philip Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959; rpt. New York: Bantam Books, 1976). All future references to the text are from this edition and marked as GC, except where the novel is named: the references are incorporated in the body of the chapter.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Philip Roth, *The Professor of Desire* (1977; rpt. London: Jonathan Cape, 1978). All future references to the text are from this edition and marked as POD, except where the novel is named; the references are incorporated in the body of the chapter.

<sup>xxiv</sup> In Roth’s fiction and essays we find a new history is being written just as it was in Doctorow’s. Roth places great emphasis on the feelings of the individual and his perception of reality. Therefore, he disregards the writing of history from the social historian’s point of view and emphasizes its writing from the participant’s point of view. Roth feels that good fiction should not safeguard socially sanctioned Jewish feelings or norms but should free people from those very things. In *Reading Myself and Others*, he writes that the “Fiction is not written to affirm the principles and beliefs that everybody seems to hold, nor does it seek to guarantee the appropriateness of our feelings. The world of fiction, in fact, frees us from the circumscriptions that society places upon feeling...” (p. 151). Incidentally this is the reason why Roth found “energy” and “courage” in his fiction when religious critics called it “anti-Semitic” and “self-hating.” Roth says about the critics who criticize his novels that “at times they see wickedness where I myself had seen energy or courage or spontaneity; they are ashamed of what I see no reason to be ashamed of, and defensive where there is no cause for defense” (p. 150). Roth does not believe that the conventional history, that sustains the Jewish tradition and institutions, should be written. On the contrary he believes that history should be written from a personal point of view, the way people who participate in an event feel, howsoever unsettling the fact might become. Unlike Rabbi Seligson who finds no celebration of the “tremendous saga of Jewish history” in

“Epstein,” Roth does (p. 154). In an article entitled, “Writing About Jews,” Roth says, “...where the history of the Jewish people comes down in time and place to become the man whom I call Epstein, that is where my knowledge must be sound. But I get the feeling that Rabbi Seligson wants to rule Lou Epstein out of Jewish history” (p. 154). It is an attempt by Roth to establish the contents of a protean life-style that emphasizes the perception of events uncontaminated by established symbols and images.

<sup>xxv</sup> Saul Bellow, “Recent American Fiction,” *American Studies International*, XV(Spring 1977), No. 3, pp. 9–10.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Melvin J. Friedman, “To ‘Make it New’: The American Novel Since 1945,” *The Wilson Quarterly*, (Winter 1978), p. 141. Friedman says that *Letting Go* illustrates “the idiosyncrasies not only of university faculties and ill-suited love relationships, but of an urban Jewish way of life.” It is this urban way of life that the Jews have tentatively forged and the way urban Jews must live in cities.

<sup>xxvii</sup> The death of Roth’s first wife Margaret Martinson in a car crash in 1968 became his inspiration for the creation of several female characters in his novels from Lucy Nelson in *When She Was Good* to Maureen Tarnopol in *My Life as a Man*.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Philip Roth, *Sabbath’s Theater* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995). Michiko Kakutani, “Mickey Sabbath, You’re No Portnoy,” *New York Times*, August 22, 1995. Kakutani finds only a superficial similarity between Portnoy and Sabbath. On a fundamental level she sees both quite different. Portnoy at age 33 has “ethical and altruistic impulses” even during his sexual rebellion, while Sabbath at 64 uses “sex and subversion” as mere “selfish desire.”

<sup>xxix</sup> Critics are divided in their response to the novel. While Harold Bloom calls the novel “a masterwork” Kikutani sees it as a “distasteful and disingenuous book.” See Harold Bloom, *Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Creative Minds* (New York: Warner Books, 2003), p. 207. Also see Kakutani, “Mickey Sabbath, You’re No Portnoy,” *New York Times*, August 22, 1995.

<sup>xxx</sup> Philip Roth, *Reading Myself and Others*. Roth himself shares the erotic world of childhood with the characters in his novels. Replying to an interview question by the Italian critic, Walter Mauro, about the sex theme in *Portnoy’s Complaint*, Roth says that he too, like thousands of others in the late Sixties, was “fighting for a foothold on the erotic homeland held in subjugation by the enemy” (p. 8).

<sup>xxxi</sup> Bruce Jay Friedman, *A Mother’s Kisses* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966), pp. 224–34.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Alfred Kazin, *Bright Book of Life*, p. 146.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Philip Roth, *Reading Myself and Others*, p. 120.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Saul Bellow, “Recent American Fiction,” p. 9. Bellow thinks the novels written by contemporary novelists like, Philip Roth and Wright Morris, portray the individual under a great strain “by the pressures of public life that threatens to overwhelm him. Nevertheless, though it has the power to overwhelm him, it permits him also to fantasize and thereby survive. In these circumstances he “grieves, complains, rages, or laughs,” but he survives.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Ihab Hassan, *Contemporary American Literature*, p. 73.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Stuart E. Rosenberg, *America is Different* (New York, 1964) p. 250; quoted by Allen Guttman in Jewish Writer in America. Rosenberg calls Roth a novelist whose “criticisms exaggerated by self-hate of [his] alienation, cannot serve as an adequate guide to the true condition of the American Jewish community of today.” Perhaps, Rosenberg’s Jewish parochialism prevents him from seeing what Roth is attempting to do.

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<sup>xxxviii</sup> Alfred Kazin, p. 147.