Philip Roth's Confessional Narrators: The Growth of Consciousness.

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PHILIP ROTH'S CONFESSIONAL NARRATORS:
THE GROWTH OF CONSCIOUSNESS

by

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VITA

Alexander George is the son of Bozidar (Djordjevich) George and Ivana (Gabersek) George. He was born 28 August 1947, in Voerde, West Germany.

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CHAPTER I

THE OPEN DECISION

"You must change your life." David Kepesh's acceptance and promulgation of this admonition from Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo" closes not only The Breast, but a significant stage in the development of Philip Roth's fiction. In a self-interview, Roth insightfully and precisely adumbrates the artistic evolution which Kepesh concludes.

The question of moral sovereignty, as it is examined in Letting Go, Portnoy's Complaint, and The Breast, is really a question of the kind of commandment the hero of each book will issue to himself; here the skepticism is directed inward, upon the hero's ambiguous sense of personal imperatives and taboos. I can even think of these characters - Gabe Wallach, Alexander Portnoy and David Kepesh - as three stages of a single explosive projectile that is fired into the barrier that forms one boundary of the individual's identity and experience: that barrier of personal inhibition, ethical conviction and plain, old monumental fear beyond which lies the moral and psychological unknown. Gabe Wallach crashes up against the wall and collapses; Portnoy proceeds on through the
fractured mortar, only to become lodged there, half in, half out. It remains for Kepesh to pass right on through the bloody hole, and out the other end, into no-man's land.

The barrier which Roth describes is a barrier of consciousness. It is the contention of this study that the controlling principle or logic underlying Roth's artistic development is to be found in the organic growth of consciousness evidenced in his confessional narrators. Furthermore, I equate Roth's barrier of consciousness with J. H. Bryant's "open decision," the recognition that the essence of the human condition is chaos, ambiguity, and uncertainty; this recognition involves the liberation from a limited viewpoint finally achieved by the third stage of Roth's projectile—David Kepesh. I believe the validity of this approach to be borne out with Roth's subsequent creation of a fourth stage, Peter Tarnopol, in the ironically titled My Life as a Man. A reflexive

1 Philip Roth, "On The Great American Novel," Reading Myself and Others (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), p. 85. Additional references to this valuable collection of essays and interviews will take the following form. After the citation of a particular essay or article, Reading Myself and Others will be abbreviated RMO, followed by the pagination.

2 Jerry H. Bryant, The Open Decision: The Contemporary American Novel and its Intellectual Background (New York: Free Press, 1970). Additional references to this work will be found in parentheses after each citation from it in the text; The Open Decision will be abbreviated TOD.
novel (that is, one in which the narrator himself is a writer producing his own fictions), it brilliantly reflects in its very structure the acceptance of ambiguity which is the heart of the "open decision."

From the beginning of Roth's literary career, he has been concerned with moral problems. In one of his germinal essays, "Writing About Jews," Roth argues that from the standpoint of both author and audience, the exploration and expansion of moral experience is a primary function and value of fiction. Furthermore, he defines the proper perspective that an audience should have when dealing with literary "realities" beyond its normal ken.

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; one of the greatnesses of the art is that it allows both the writer and the reader to respond to experience in ways not always available in day-to-day conduct; or, if they are available, they are not possible, or manageable, or legal, or advisable, or even necessary to the business of living. We may not even know that we have such a range of feelings and responses until we have contact with the work of fiction. This does not mean that either reader or writer no longer brings any judgment to bear upon human action. Rather, we judge at a different level of our being, for not only are we judging with the aid of new feelings but without the necessity of having to act upon judgment. Ceasing for a while to be upright citizens, we drop into another layer of consciousness. And this expansion of moral
consciousness, this exploration of moral fantasy, is of considerable value to a man and to society.\(^3\)

The writer, of course, utilizes his characters as the vehicles for his exploration. With an extremely apt metaphor, Roth has characterized his protagonists as "men and women whose moorings have been cut, and who are swept away from their native shores and out to sea."\(^4\)

In short, "all are living beyond their psychological means; it isn't a matter of sinking or swimming--they have, as it were, to invent the crawl."\(^5\)

While swimming in their respective seas, Roth's confessional narrators struggle for a moral certainty impossible to attain. Gabe Wallach, Alexander Portnoy, David Kepesh, and Peter Tarnopol, respectively narrators of Goodbye, Columbus, Letting Go, Portnoy's Complaint, The Breast (and The Professor of Desire), and My Life As a Man, are all studies in disintegration, men deeply alienated and isolated, full of guilt, yet struggling for wholeness.

Since the narrators are as they are, conflict characterizes all relationships--professional, familial, or romantic.

\(^3\)“Writing About Jews,” RMO, p. 151.

\(^4\)“On The Breast,” RMO, p. 65.

\(^5\)Ibid., pp. 65-66.
For the most part, colleagues are charlatans, relatives are oppressors, and women are either Madonnas or whores, both ultimately emasculators. The isolation of these protagonists is made concrete most grotesquely in the Kafkan transformation of David Kepesh into a breast. Paradoxically, the struggle for moral certainty concludes with Kepesh's final acceptance of uncertainty and ambiguity as part of the given of human existence. Indeed, it is precisely this perspective which constitutes the fundamental core of J.H. Bryant's "open decision."

Drawing upon evidence from physics, philosophy, sociology, and psychology, Bryant posits a contemporary intellectual milieu dominated by a relativistic perception of reality which "forms the foundation of contemporary morality." (TOD, p. 4) Moreover, the novels he considers "examine that foundation and dramatize the dilemmas of that morality." (TOD, p. 4) Borrowing and expanding upon the meaning of a phrase coined by Max Scheler, the twentieth century phenomenologist, Bryant delineates the following as fundamental to the "open decision."

Its main assumption is that reality lies in the individual thing--the process of the actual entity. The highest good is the enactment of that reality, which is the achievement of the highest possible intensity of individuality. That good is most accessible through human consciousness, for the basis of human consciousness is the sense of oneself as a unity that is different from the world of which it is conscious. Consciousness used in
this sense does not mean simply a state of intellectual lucidity in which one forms abstract explanations. It means the recognition that the self is not identical with or exhausted by selfconsciousness, that there is a great reality to be felt though not explained....True consciousness brings with it a sense of wholeness though not completeness, for it acknowledges and affirms the ambiguities and paradoxes of which, by definition, the individual is constituted. (TOD, pp. 231-32)

Furthermore, without a transcendent reality—a God—to fix meaning, man is free to determine his own; he himself defines the value of human life. Each individual is "condemned" (as Sartre articulates it) to forge his own identity through the free choices he makes; there are no excuses, nor can one choose not to choose, for this constitutes bad faith. Since reality is ambiguous and paradoxical and consciousness is limited, there are no guarantees that any choice is a "correct" one. To their chagrin, a great many of Roth's hubristic protagonists must be educated to the truth of the following maxim: "We cannot predict consequences; we can only suffer them." (TOD, p. 232) Suffering, however, is not a reason for despair:

Satisfaction lies, paradoxically, in the discovery and the acceptance of the freedom to conceive dreams and the limitations life places upon us in the realization of those dreams. Every victory of human consciousness contains some element of defeat. It is this ambiguity that gives the novels of our time their air of apparent pessimism. (TOD, p. 7)
The Pyrrhic victory achieved is in arriving "at a higher consciousness that sheds light upon the human condition, its limits, and its possibilities." (TOD, p. 7) In the words of David Kepesh's psychiatrist, one must simply learn to "Tolerate it." Furthermore, value is found in "the intensity with which the individual knows he is alive and feels growth, change, imminent death." (TOD, p. 7)

The static individual, the dogmatic individual, the Lucy Nelsons of this world, are engaged in denying true consciousness; their tragedy is that the "liberation from a limited viewpoint is, in the 'open decision,' the sine qua non of human fulfillment." (TOD, p. 35)

How, then, does all this apply to the study of fiction? First of all, I believe Bryant's characterization of the contemporary world view as relativistic to be valid. Moreover, although a truism, it is pertinent to recall that while an artist must confront the eternal problems, he does so within the context of his own time. The questions remain the same; the answers framed are ultimately dependent on the perspective of the artist making them. For example, both Sophocles in Oedipus The King and Roth in My Life As a Man are concerned with the basic problem of identity. Whereas Oedipus finally defines himself in terms of a transcendent order, Peter Tarnopol can do no such thing, for his universe is not an ordered one; Tarnopol's "reality" will allow no more than
a relativistic, ambiguous "description" of the self; in short, Tarnopol's world view is defined by the principles and values fundamental to the "open decision." 6

The same is true for the fictive worlds in the many novels which Bryant discusses. His underlying assumption is that serious contemporary novels are grounded in and examine the dilemmas of the "open decision."

Their dominating concern is with the achievement of the highest good--individual satisfaction. This concern usually appears in two basic forms. The preferred situation may be impeded by the obstacle of social or institutional tyranny, emptying the individual of his spontaneity, forcing him into predetermined grooves, depriving him of alternatives. Or it may be thwarted by the characters' deficiency of consciousness, producing an inability to embrace the conditions of life--uncertainty, ambiguity, death, other people, their own choices. Some novels focus on the obstacles of social tyranny, others on the rebellion against that tyranny, still others on the deficiency--and sometimes the discovery--of consciousness. Whatever the emphasis, the tacit or expressed goal is clear: the achievement of self-fulfillment through the affirmation of the human condition, the establishment of social freedom, and the cultivation of 'true consciousness.' (TOD, p. 118)

The focus of this study is on the deficiency, discovery, and growth of consciousness of Roth's isolated and

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6 In a different context, Norman Podhoretz focuses on this as the key to Roth's centrality as a writer, for "in the course of his literary career more and more people have come along who are exactly in tune with the sense of things he has always expressed in his work and who have accordingly and in increasing numbers come to recognize him as their own." In "Laureate of the New Class," Commentary, 54 (December 1972), 4.
alienated protagonists. Their condition—that of the outsider—is the given for much of contemporary fiction. Whether due to general circumstances (for example, Portnoy's Jewishness) or a cataclysmic change (Kepesh's transformation into a breast), each protagonist must struggle to work out the psychological and moral terms which allow him not only to be true to his "history" but to accept the human condition.

Two of Roth's novels, Our Gang and The Great American Novel, satirically confront the "obstacles of social tyranny" rather than the problems of the individual consciousness; as such, they fall beyond the scope of this study. At a superficial level, Our Gang is Roth's pre-Watergate cudgeling of Richard Nixon; ironically, the satire is not wholly successful; as Murray Kempton argues, "the parodist is here defeated by an original who is endlessly capable of inventing parodies of himself that are far beyond the imagination of even the best of us." Although, as Roth admits, "Nixon is sufficient

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7 I am indebted to Dr. Paul Messbarger for this analysis. This larger context is the focus of John McDaniel's study, The Fiction of Philip Roth (Haddonfield, New Jersey: Haddonfield House, 1974). McDaniel lucidly argues that Roth's protagonists engage in two modes of existential response to the human condition: the outsider is either a "spiritual activist" who "undertakes the most meaningful spiritual quest by confronting society," (p. 51) or the victim-hero of absurdist fiction.

unto himself to make the steam rise,"\(^9\) the broader objects of Roth's attack are the decay of American political language and the concomitant complicity of the media in purveying a fallacious "Official Version of Reality."\(^10\) The satire actually takes inspiration from its two epigraphs. The first is Swift's devastating explanation of lying from "A Voyage to the Houyhnhnms," and the second from George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language."

\[\ldots\text{one ought to recognize that the present political chaos is connected with the decay of language, and that one can probably bring about some improvement by starting at the verbal end...Political language-and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists-is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.}\(^11\]

Roth's wacky _reductio ad absurdum_ demonstrates how the Official Version of Reality is created from 'pure wind.'

Similarly, in _The Great American Novel_, Roth utilizes the mythical Patriot Baseball League as a metaphor for a corrupt America, whose leaders proclaim, as does Commissioner Kuhn in an imaginary interview, "the integrity of the institution."\(^12\) Roth seizes upon baseball as "a means to dramatize the struggle between

\[\ldots\]


\(^10\)Ibid., p. 57.

\(^11\)Epigraph to _Our Gang_

the benign national myth of itself that a great power prefers to perpetuate, and the relentlessly insidious, very nearly demonic reality (like the kind we had known in the sixties) that will not give an inch in behalf of that idealized mythology." Since the primary purpose of these two works is to "explore the absurdities of the social and political landscape of American public life," rather than the effect of this landscape upon the private lives of individual Americans, I take my leave of them.

Perhaps the best way to approach Roth's novels is to first examine the early short stories; in them, one finds in miniature the thematic obsessions which are worked out in the longer works. Roth's second published piece, "The Contest for Aaron Gold," which found its way into Martha Foley's The Best American Short Stories of 1956, is as good a place to begin as any.

In an unmailed letter written to critic Diana Trilling, Roth defended himself against her charge that his view of life (as evidenced in Portnoy's Complaint)

14McDaniel, p. 150.
was "grimly deterministic."\(^{15}\) His quite valid defense was that "the business of choosing is the primary occupation of any number of my characters."\(^{16}\) Roth proceeded to point out that this was the case not only in his novels, but also in the early stories which were published along with the novella *Goodbye, Columbus*. Each protagonist "is seen making a conscious, deliberate, even willful choice beyond the boundary lines of his life, and just so as to give expression to what in his spirit will not be grimly determined, by others, or even by what he had himself taken to be his own nature."\(^{17}\) As was indicated in the introductory discussion of the "open decision," the process of choosing is both necessary and unavoidable for true consciousness. Werner Samuelson, the protagonist of "The Contest for Aaron Gold,"\(^{18}\) is the first in a long line of characters whom Roth dissects in the course of this process.


\(^{16}\)Ibid., p. 27.

\(^{17}\)Ibid., p. 28.

Werner is an Austrian sculptor, who in the wake of Anschluss and the opening days of World War II, flees to America. For fourteen years, he scrapes by at a subsistence level with a ceramics shop in Philadelphia. Since the shop is about to go under, he accepts a position as a ceramics instructor at a summer camp. Although he has escaped one kind of camp in fleeing to America, Werner is soon to experience another kind, which is spiritually debilitating in its own right.

Early on in the story, an indication of Camp Lakeside's hierarchy of values is made manifest. The owner, Mr. Steinberg, informs Werner that his salary "was to be second only to a Mr. Lefty Shulberg, the swimming coach." In addition to this illuminating detail, it is learned that the schedule of the camp "was such that every boy in camp visited ceramics shop three hours a week, no more than one hour a day." Of course, swimming and the other non-artistic activities are on the agenda daily.

Werner's first interaction with his students is less than gratifying. He had finally decided (and he knew he was hedging) that the first day he would let them browse around. Halfway through the hour, however, when it seemed the boys were restless with browsing--one had just cracked a companion on the skull with a bony elbow--Werner herded them around the wheel and began showing them how to work with clay. As he worked, their blank faces stared rigidly up at him. It was a little upsetting. (CAG, p. 204)
Defeated by their indifference, he allows them to play with the clay on their own. In a withdrawal which pointedly foreshadows the outcome of the story, he sneaks off to smoke a couple of cigarettes. When he returns, he finds the boys off to swimming class; among the typically banal artifacts (mainly baseballs and trays), he discovers one piece which sparks his interest: a small knight. Several days later, he meets the sculptor, Aaron Gold, whom he asks to stay after class. A brief bit of dialogue ensues which gives a deeper insight into the values of the camp. Werner asks Aaron his name.

'It's Aaron,' the boy said.
'Aaron what?'
'Aaron Gold Mr. Werner,' the boy admitted.
'I'll play with everybody else from now on, promise.'
'You'll what?'
'You gonna report me?' Aaron said.
Werner told him that he merely liked his knight and wondered if he might not want some help.
'Can I play alone?' Aaron asked. 'Uncle Irv says we gotta learn to play together.'
'Who's Uncle Irv?'
'He's the head--the head counselor, I mean. He says we gotta not play alone. Uncle Lefty says so too. It's no good for you. (CAG, p. 207)

Here we have the opening notes of a motif which will resurface throughout Roth's fiction: the debilitating effect upon the individual consciousness of societal demands. Aaron, only "about eight years old, bony, underfed, a little tired looking," has already capitulated out of fear to the claims of authority and conformity.
It is also quite significant that the camp attendants are all called "uncle"—prefiguring Roth's concern with the family as agent of social control. Nonetheless, Roth's primary focus is not the little boy, but with the moral crisis he triggers in Werner.

The camp is so regimented that Aaron's habitual tardiness for swimming becomes the cause celebre in a "contest" for the boy between Lefty and Werner. Initially, when Aaron asks to stay after class (thereby cutting into swim time) in order to work on his knight—who is fighting an imaginary dragon—Werner responds "Of course... of course--what do you think, I'm on the dragon's side?"

From this point on, the dragon becomes increasingly symbolic of the values of Camp Lakeside; the clash between value systems, the artist in opposition to society, takes form. The clash is by no means clear cut; Roth is not involved in a simplistic allegory. His artistic vision is much more ironic and ambiguous, even in this early work.

Although Werner's first impulse is to give Aaron as much time as he needs, Steinberg and Lefty soon exert increasing pressure on him as well. Part of the camp's selling point is that an "all-around kid" is molded. Therefore, every child is to have something concrete come out of ceramics class, no matter how misshapen or pedestrian as proof of "achievement." As the camp session
draws to a close, Aaron is nowhere near to completing his ambitious project. In a confrontation with Steinberg, Werner is commanded to have Aaron speed-up and complete his knight or else. Werner finally decides, "after all, Steinberg was his employer, paying the check, and he was the employee. This was just no summer to get fired." The morning of his capitulation, Werner gives the boys a little pep talk and for the first time completely allies himself with the institution.

At the close of the hour that morning Werner told the boys that he was going to ask them a favor. 'It's not a big favor,' he said. 'I just wonder if some of you who have been working slowly, couldn't work a little faster. Just a little.' He put his back to Aaron. 'We all want something finished when our parents come up on Sunday....' He felt foolish for using the plural. (CAG, p. 212)

Werner's speech is interrupted by the blasts of a horn calling the boys to swimming class and the bellowing voice of Lefty. "Swim! That means everybody. You too, Sir Lancelot!" The latter remark, directed to Werner, is rich in irony, for Werner is soon to betray Aaron as Lancelot did Arthur. Aaron does not scamper off happily as do the other boys.

'Uncle Werner?'
Werner turned. 'Aaron. Aaron, you're supposed to be at swim. Now get out.'
'Uncle Werner,' the boy said sharply,'I can't work no quicker.'
'Look, Aaron, no time for explanations. Lefty's waiting.'
'I can't finish by Sunday, Uncle Werner. I just can't!'
'You'll have to. Now go, Aaron!' Werner pushed him in the direction of the lake. The boy spun around.
'Hey, whose side you on, Uncle Werner?'
'What?' Werner snapped.
'Whose side--me or the dragon?' The boy's eyes looked like two brown egg yolks.
Werner smacked him on the behind. 'OK. OK. Don't work no quicker. Now get down to Lefty. And on the double!' Werner turned, mumbling to himself, 'For crying out loud....' (CAG, p. 212)

As is quite evident by his equivocating, Werner is torn by the conflicting claims of artistic integrity and pecuniary interest. At the conclusion of each interaction with one of his antagonists, the balance slips ever so slightly to the position that individual embodies.

Werner's final confrontation with Steinberg takes place two days before visiting day. Aaron's knight is still unfinished. Totally in character, Steinberg explodes with anger and stomps off. In a devastating depiction of Werner's deficiency of consciousness, Roth lays bare an unfounded confidence for which Werner will pay dearly.

He pondered for several minutes--and then it dawned: it was too close to visiting day. The camp wouldn't be all-around if there was a new ceramics shop without a new ceramics instructor. So, Mr. Steinberg had nearly for-christ-saked him into the floor, but he hadn't fired him. And after visiting day, the incident cold and no deadlines to be met, he certainly wouldn't fire him. At least Werner's six hundred dollars seemed safe. Werner stared at the knight. What would Lefty say when he heard about the goddam thing? What he might think was that as far as the contest for Aaron Gold was concerned--for, apparently, that
was what it had become to Lefty—he had lost. Lefty probably didn't like to lose, but Werner had had his way, and if that wasn't a loss, at best it was a tie. (CAG, p. 215)

Werner proceeds to his final betrayal of Aaron and, more importantly, the artistic values which they both, at least nominally, share: he completes the unfinished knight. Once this regrettable decision is made, the structural turning point of the story, the denouement rapidly follows.

The next morning, Aaron, to say the least, is not amused.

"You ruined him," the boy suddenly shouted, pulling at his yellow hair. 'You ruined him, you did, you did....' And then he ran out the door and off along the edge of the lake, like a small wild animal who gets out of a blazing forest as fast as he can. (CAG, p. 216)

In a frenzy, Werner destroys the knight; within an hour, he walks out of the camp for good, without taking leave of anybody.

John N. McDaniel, the only other critic to closely examine this story, correctly views "The Contest for Aaron Gold" as representative of a central conflict in Roth's fiction, i.e., the struggle of the artist against a destructive society. However, we part company, in that McDaniel too closely allies Werner with the artistic point of view and allows him to get off much too easily for his betrayal. For McDaniel, "At the end of the tale,
when Werner realizes that in completing Aaron's unfinished knight he has capitulated to the Camp Lakeside values of Steinberg and Shulberg, he reverses the capitulation by becoming knight and dragon in one by shattering the knight. I believe a close reading of this "reversal" warrants a much harsher view of Werner's action and subsequent withdrawal. That Werner has been an ambiguous admixture of "knight and dragon in one" is precisely Roth's point from the very beginning. Rather than being a form of expiation, the destruction of the knight is yet another capitulation. It was clear to Werner that his success and continued employment was contingent upon each "well-rounded kid" completing a project. With Aaron's refusal to accept his hypocrisy, Werner knows that the jig is up; he knows he will be booted out in any case, and shuffles off rather than stick around for the final humiliation. In the context of the "open decision," Werner's deficiency of consciousness deters him from accepting his ambiguous nature. Unable to reconcile his inner contradictions, refusing to suffer the consequences of his choices, Werner attempts to avoid the pain of awareness and runs. This pattern of inauthentic behavior appears repeatedly throughout Roth's fiction.

\[19\] McDaniels, p. 14.
In their considerations of Roth's fiction, most critics have recognized his obsession with the manifold problems of individual freedom and integrity. In his reply to Trilling, Roth identifies precisely this thematic motif. In an analysis of *When She Was Good*, he declares, "The issue of authority over one's life is very much at the center of this novel as it has been in my other fiction." Furthermore, in a comment broadly applicable to much of his work, Roth characterizes *Portnoy's Complaint* as "a story that revolves upon the ironies of the struggle for personal freedom...." Unfortunately, a great many critics have either missed or glossed over these ironies and ambiguities in their discussions of the works.

Ozzie Freedman, the thirteen year old protagonist of "The Conversion of the Jews," struggles for freedom while enmeshed in the web of religious oppression. Nonetheless, Irving and Harriet Deer have quite properly

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21 Ibid., p. 29.

22 "The Conversion of the Jews" is one of the five short stories published along with the novella in *Goodbye, Columbus*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1959). Parenthetical numbers in the text and footnotes unaccompanied by an abbreviation are page references to this edition of the stories.
pointed out Roth's primary concern: "What has been violated in him is not so much his logic as his sense that as an individual he has the right to ask questions even of religion. He is protesting his individuality rather than his theology." 23

The immaculate conception is the bone of contention between Ozzie and Rabbi Binder (the rather obvious thematic significance of their last names is but one of the flaws in this at times sophomoric work). The story opens with Ozzie and his friend, Itzie, mulling over a theological conundrum.

'No, I asked the question about God, how if He could create the heaven and earth in six days, and make all the animals and the fish and the light in six days—the light especially, that's what always gets me, that He could make the light. Making fish and animals, that's pretty good—'

'That's damn good.' Itzie's appreciation was honest but unimaginative: it was as though God had just pitched a one-hitter.

'But making light... I mean when you think about it, it's really something,' Ozzie said. 'Anyway, I asked Binder if He could make all that in six days, and He could pick the six days he wanted right out of nowhere, why couldn't He let a woman have a baby without having intercourse.'

(pp. 152-53)

Binder's answer, that Christ was historical and not God, completely skirts the issue, as do all of his answers to Ozzie's questions. Twice before, Binder has failed Ozzie. The first time he was unable to satisfactorily square the

23 Irving and Harriet Deer, "Philip Roth and the Crisis in American Fiction," Minnesota Review, 6, (No. 4, 1966), 357.
discrepancy between the Declaration if Independence's emphasis on equality and the Jewish appellation, "The Chosen People." The second time, he was unable to satisfactorily explain why the death of eight Jews out of a total of fifty-eight deaths in a plane crash made the crash "a tragedy." For Ozzie, the distinction between "political equality and spiritual legitimacy" and the concept of "cultural unity" were no answers at all for the real problems. "What Ozzie wanted to know was always different."

In an ironically titled "free discussion time," the conflict comes to a head. In a scene more than vaguely reminiscent of the attempted indoctrination of Stephen Dedalus in A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man, Ozzie finally explodes under Binder's prodding.

'You don't know! You don't know anything about God!'
The rabbi spun back towards Ozzie. 'What?'
'You don't know--you don't-'
'Apologize, Oscar, apologize!' It was a threat.
'You don't-'
Rabbi Binder's hand flicked out at Ozzie's cheek. Perhaps it had only been meant to clamp the boy's mouth shut, but Ozzie ducked and the palm caught him squarely on the nose. (pp. 158-59)

Ozzie flees to the synagogue roof, bolts shut the trap door, and asks himself the ultimate question: "Can this be me?"

In an affirmation of identity, not only does he accept himself, but, looking at all of the people who have
congregated below, "Ozzie, who a moment earlier hadn't been able to control his own body, started to feel the meaning of the word control: he felt Peace and he felt power." The remainder of the short story is taken up with the exercise of Ozzie's new found power.

Yakov Blotnik, the senile old caretaker of the synagogue, for whom "life had fractionated itself simply: things were either good-for-the-Jews or no-good-for-the-Jews." puts out an alarm to the fire department; the firemen arrive and a large yellow net is deployed. Soonafter, his mother arrives and hears the crowd of boys chanting for Ozzie to jump. With unconscious irony, Binder informs her, "He's doing it for them. He won't listen to me. It's them." Up on the roof, Ozzie realizes he must make a choice.

Being on the roof, it turned out, was a serious thing. If he jumped would the singing become dancing? Would it? What would jumping stop? Yearningly, Ozzie wished he could rip open the sky, plunge his hands through, and pull out the sun; and on the sun, like a coin, would be stamped JUMP or DON'T JUMP. (p. 168)

A decision is reached. Ozzie demands that all of the spectators, including the firemen, get down on their knees "in the Gentile posture of prayer." The catechism commences.

Ozzie looked around again; and then he called to Rabbi Binder.
'Rabbi?'
'Yes, Oscar.'
'Rabbi Binder, do you believe in God?'
'Yes.'
'Do you believe God can do anything?' Ozzie leaned his head out into the darkness. 'Anything?'
'Oscar, I think—'
'Tell me you believe God can do Anything.' There was a second's hesitation. Then: 'God can do Anything.'
'Tell me you believe God can make a child without intercourse.'
'He can.'
'Tell me!'
'God,' Rabbi Binder admitted, 'can make a child without intercourse.'
'Mamma, you tell me.'
'God can make a child without intercourse,' his mother said.
'Make him tell me.' There was no doubt who him was.
In a few moments Ozzie heard an old comical voice say something to the increasing darkness about God.
Next, Ozzie made everybody say it. And then he made them all say they believed in Jesus Christ—first one at a time, then all together. (pp. 169-70)

With what Irving Howe characterized a "maudlin touch," Ozzie has one final demand to make: "You should never hit anybody about God." Finally, all agree to this proviso before Ozzie comes down by jumping "right into the center of the yellow net that glowed in the evening's edge like an overgrown halo."

The interpretation of Ozzie's catechism and his final action is the source of much critical dispute. The general view is stated by John McDaniel. With his leap,

24 Irving Howe, "Philip Roth Reconsidered," Commentary, 54 (December 1972), 71.
Ozzie "re-enters the community." What, specifically, is the nature of that community? Whereas for Joseph C. Landis, the leap "becomes paradoxically a moral symbol of his conversion to Judaism and to life," Allen Guttmann finds that "the form of the catechism and the imagery are unmistakably Christian." Whichever view one buys, it is essential to keep in mind that Roth's concern in these stories is with the ironies and ambiguities implicit in the search for personal freedom. Glenn Meeter has precisely identified the one overriding source of irony in "The Conversion of the Jews." For Meeter, "the ritual confession Ozzie forces on his fellows at the end of the story is no different, essentially, from the ritual his mother and rabbi had earlier tried to impose upon him..." Meeter finds the point of the story to be "don't presume to confine God within a People or Creed."  

25 McDaniell, p. 57.  
29 Ibid., p. 20.
What is one to make of all of this from the perspective of the "open decision?" The following facts must be kept in mind. By definition, human reality is seen as the paradox of rationality and irrationality. The validity of faith, therefore, becomes a key issue for many contemporary novelists.

Their point is that the highest consciousness and hence the most intense human existence includes faith, which, while not rational, is yet among the most certain of our certainties. Their note is positive and affirmative, though it does not exclude the mixture of pain and regret that we have learned to expect from the contemporary novel. Faith is a function of the consciousness which affirms those aspects of ourselves and our world that never come into consciousness, but lie on its outskirts as dark presences that reveal themselves only in ambiguous and inarticulate shadows, something like Jung's archetypes of the collective unconscious. This faith appears as religious faith in its most fundamental form and as simple faith in the potential of the human being to live worthily in the midst of a stultifying and dehumanizing machine world. (TOD, p. 258)

Ozzie's rejection of the doctrinaire rationality espoused by Binder represents a leap of faith on his part. In a judgment applicable to all of his antagonists, Ozzie also rejects the mindset represented by the alien, mumbling Blotnik: "To Ozzie the mumbling had always seemed a monotonous, curious prayer; what made it curious was that old Blotnik had been mumbling so steadily for so many years, Ozzie suspected he had memorized the prayers and forgotten all about God."
Unfortunately, Ozzie's victory of consciousness carries within it the seeds of failure. The grasping for power, the exhilaration in its exercise, brings Ozzie both literally and figuratively to his downfall. The story does not merely "emphasize, ironically, the unity of dead orthodoxy."^30 Up on the roof, Ozzie learns the truth of the old saw: we have met the enemy and they are us. For Ozzie, "If there was a question to be asked now it was not 'Is it me?' but rather 'Is it us?...Is it us?'"

It is not Ozzie who must now "apologize," but his erstwhile oppressors. However, as soon as he takes on his role as catechist, he ironically transforms himself into the new oppressor. Liberation is exchanged for bondage, for the master is as enslaved as his victims. Clearly, in "The Conversion of the Jews," Roth dramatizes first the discovery, and then the deficiency, of consciousness on the part of the "freed man" who rejoins his fellows.

In by far the best of the five short stories published along with Goodbye, Columbus, Eli Peck, the hero of "Eli, the Fanatic," is engaged in much the same process as is Ozzie, his younger spiritual brother.

^30 Meeter, p. 20
The difference between the two of them is that Roth cuts the narrative off precisely at the point of discovery of consciousness; of course, it just may be that Eli simply is not given enough rope to hang himself as does Ozzie in "The Conversion of the Jews." In any case, Eli's quest for spiritual integrity definitely is not as free from ambiguity and irony as many critics have found it.

The major theme of "Eli, the Fanatic," as in "The Contest for Aaron Gold" and "The Conversion of the Jews," is the struggle of the individual smothered by societal constraints. The difference in this story is that the conflict is worked out within the context of the broader issue of minority versus majority rights. As in "The Contest for Aaron Gold," Roth clearly delineates a clash of value systems; in "Eli, the Fanatic," the clash is between an unwanted yeshivah, an Orthodox Jewish School, and the community in which it is situated: Woodenton, a suburb of New York City. Out of this crucible comes Eli's epiphany and conversion to true consciousness.

The year is 1948. Eli is an attorney representing the assimilated Jews of Woodenton who are upset by the sudden appearance of a yeshivah in their community. His antagonist is Tzuref, the German-born headmaster of the school which is home for eighteen displaced children. When
Tzuref refuses to leave Woodenton for the city, Eli writes a letter hoping to at least negotiate a lower profile for the members of the yeshivah. The letter fixes the values and fears of the Jews, who have only been allowed to live in Woodenton since the end of the war.

I don't think there's any reason for us not to be able to come up with some sort of compromise that will satisfy the Jewish community of Woodenton and the Yeshivah and yourself. It seems to me that what most disturbs my neighbors are the visits to town by the gentlemen in the black hat, suit, etc. Woodenton is a progressive suburban community whose members, both Jewish and Gentile, are anxious that their families live in comfort and beauty and serenity. That is, after all, the twentieth century, and we do not think it too much to ask that the members of our community dress in a manner appropriate to the time and place. (p. 275)

Eli's pregnant wife, Miriam, and friend, Ted Heller, are the story's chief spokesmen for the values of the suburb. As for Miriam, "All she wanted were order and love in her private world." "Don't rock the boat," is the banner beneath which she rallies. When Eli becomes too involved with the problem of the yeshivah she counsels,"You go overboard Eli. That's your trouble. You won't do anything in moderation. That's how people destroy themselves." Miriam is also the quintessence of the late forties' version of suburban hip. At one point, she leaves a note for Eli which reads, "I sort of had sort of Oedipal experience with the baby today." In a mock conversation with his
unborn child, Eli gently satirizes Miriam's pretensions.

'You know what your mother brought to this marriage--a sling chair and a goddam New School enthusiasm for Sigmund Freud.'

Miriam feigned sleep, he could tell by the breathing.

'I'm telling the kid the truth, aren't I, Miriam? A sling chair, three months to go on a New Yorker subscription, and An Introduction to Psychoanalysis. Isn't that right?' (p. 273)

Ted Heller, who sizes "people's feet with an X-ray machine, for God's sake" also preaches the gospel of moderation. The apparel and habits of the yeshivah members are an acute source of embarrassment to him, the assimilated, modern Jew. A rather stolid fellow, Ted totally misses the half-hearted humor when Eli facetiously says, "We can convert them" about the Orthodox Jews.

'What, make a bunch of Catholics out of them? Look, Eli--pal, there's a good healthy relationship in this town because it's modern Jews and Protestants. That's the point, isn't it, Eli? Let's not kid each other, I'm not Harry. The way things are now are fine--like human beings. There's going to be no pogroms in Woodenton. Right? 'Cause there's no fanatics, no crazy people--' Eli winced, and closed his eyes a second--'just people who respect each other, and leave each other be. Common sense is the ruling thing, Eli. I'm for common sense. Moderation.' (p. 292)

In short, the attitude of the entire community is best epitomized by the grumblings of a certain Harry Shaw:

"Eli, when I left the city, Eli, I didn't plan the city should come to me." But indeed, they are confronted with the complexities of the city.
Although Eli first goes out to the yeshivah with the position that the school must close, Tzuref stands firm: "We stay... We are tired." He also refuses the compromise offered by Eli. In response to what really is a plea that the "gentleman in the black hat, suit, etc." wear modern clothes, Tzuref writes, "The suit the gentleman wears is all he's got." The phrase "all he's got" comes to mean not only his clothes, but also the culture, traditions, and suffering they symbolize. Eli tries to make clear to Tzuref that the zoning law is against him in the dispute. What Eli disparagingly terms Tzuref's "Talmudic wisdom" bedevils him, and also clearly differentiates the values of the yeshivah from those of Woodenton.

'Mr. Peck, who made the law, may I ask you that?'
'The People.'
'No.'
'Yes.'
'Before the people.'
'No one. Before the people there was no law.'
Eli didn't care for the conversation, but with only candlelight, he was being lulled into it. 'Wrong,' Tzuref said.
'We make the law, Mr. Tzuref. It is our community. These are my neighbors. I am their attorney. They pay me. Without law there is chaos.'
'What you call law, I call shame. The heart, Mr. Peck, the heart is law! God!' he announced.

For Eli, the conflict between head and heart (another ubiquitous Rothian theme, most fully worked out in
Letting Go) is determined in favor of the heart.

A decision is made. In a frenzy, Eli, who twice before has suffered a nervous breakdown, returns home and packs his own green suit for the "greenie." The excitement proves too much for Miriam, who pleads "moderation" with Eli, and labor is induced. Eli rushes her to the hospital and on the way home drops the suit off on the porch of the yeshivah. The next morning his son is born; for the community, this event pales in significance to the fact that the greenie is sighted walking up and down the streets of Woodenton wearing Eli's suit. Ted calls him twice to report on the progress of the greenie, who finally reaches Eli's home. Their eyes meet and an unspoken question is asked by the transformed greenie: "The face is all right, I can keep it?" The first step in Eli's transformation takes place. He identifies with the greenie: "those eyes were the eyes in his head. They were his, he had made them."

Turnabout is fair play. Later on in the day the very same Bonwit Teller box which contained his green tweed suit is left on Eli's doorstep.

Inside the box was an eclipse. But black soon sorted from black, and shortly there was the glassy black of lining, the coarse black of trousers, the dead black of fraying threads, and in the center the mountain of black: the hat. He picked the box from the doorstep and carried
it inside. For the first time in his life he smelled the color of blackness: a little stale, a little sour, a little old, but nothing that could overwhelm you. Still, he held the package at arm's length and deposited it on the dining room table. (p. 299)

Eli puts on the other man's clothes and sets out for the yeshivah. There he finds the greenie painting a pillar while still in Eli's suit. The greenie attempts to flee, and the only bits of communication Eli elicits are "two white droplets stuck to each cheek" and a plaintive gesture in response to Eli's query, "Tell me, what can I do for you, I'll do it...."

...in exchange, the greenie gave him an answer. He raised one hand to his chest, and then jammed it, finger first, toward the horizon. And with what a pained look! As though the air were full of razors! Eli followed the finger and saw beyond the knuckle, out past the nail, Woodenton. (p. 306)

Eli experiences a "revelation." He will bear living witness to everything that the suit symbolizes, and confront his friends and neighbors by parading through the streets of Woodenton. The community's judgment is immediate: once again, Eli is having a nervous breakdown.

Eli, however, "knew what he did was not insane, though he felt every inch of its strangeness." What he also knew was "who he was down to his marrow." In his progress through the suburb, "Eli greeted no one, but raised his face to all. He wished passionately that
he had tears to show them." He does not, however--the central irony which structures Roth's story. No man, no matter how strong his powers of empathy, can fully share in the experience of another. By putting on the greenie's clothes, Eli may take on his outward appearance, but the inner reality is much more evasive.

The story rapidly draws to a close. Eli goes to the hospital where Ted betrays him by having two white-coated interns subdue and sedate him.

But he rose, suddenly, as though up out of a dream, and flailing his arms screamed: 'I'm the father!'

But the window disappeared. In a moment they tore off his jacket--it gave so easily, in one yank. Then a needle slid under his skin. The drug calmed his soul, but did not touch it down where the blackness had reached. (p. 313)

Critical reaction is as varied on this story as it is for much of Roth's fiction. On one hand, is the rather positive analysis elucidated by critics such as Theodore Solotaroff, John McDaniel, John Hollis, and Glenn Meeter. Solotaroff views Eli's action as a "conversion into the essential Jew, achieved by acts of striving, sacrificing, and suffering for the sake of some fundamental goodness and truth in one's self that has been lost and buried."31 Similarly, McDaniel

sees the conversion as a return "to the letter and spirit of traditional Judaism...," and Hollis finds "Eli Peck is not overtly the hero type, and yet one may see in his effort to come to terms with his ancestral 'homeland' a spiritual quest of heroic dimensions." More generally, for Meeter the donning of the suit "insists on man's unscientific relationship to God."34

On the other hand, Irving and Harriet Deer and Allen Guttmann interpret Eli's act much more harshly. The Deer's perceive it to be "dishonest in the sense that Eli can no more own the experiences that make the orthodox dress a truthful expression of the Greenie's identity, than he can disown that part of himself which belongs to Woodenton." Rather than being dishonest, Guttmann finds it pathetic.

There is only one path across the psychic abyss that separates Woodenton from the yeshivah--madness. Eli's fate is truly a tragedy and not an expiatory aberration. He has been driven to insanity, at least for the moment, by the hardness of the zealots who have treated him as a fanatic.36

32 McDaniel, p. 58.
34 Meeter, p. 18.
35 Irving and Harriet Deer, p. 359.
36 Guttmann, p. 71.
It must be kept in mind that "insanity" is defined by the larger community, the zealots of moderation. Eli by no means feels he is insane, even though he flippantly refers to himself as "Eli, the Flipper." What is his position? Eli chooses the blackness of spiritual mystery and faith, what Bryant terms "the dark presences that reveal themselves only in ambiguous and inarticulate shadows." (TOD, p. 258) In so doing, he rejects the "lights" of Woodenton (symbolism developed throughout the story, as is the obvious play on words "wooden-town"). He breaks away from and confronts the "normalcy" of the larger community, yet is rejected by the yeshivah. Eli stands totally alone and his inability to cry defines his isolation and alienation. Ironically his quest for community and true consciousness concludes with betrayal and physical coercion under the guise of benign interest.

The litany of defeat continues with "Epstein," a vaudeville sketch in the form of a short story. Although Lou Epstein is not involved in a quest for a higher level of consciousness as are Ozzie and Eli, he does wish to experience life more intensely at the physical level. Epstein is a middle-aged businessman who undergoes a sexual reawakening. The cause for his hibernation is grossly evident.
His wife Goldie breathed thickly beside him, as though she suffered from eternal bronchitis. Ten minutes before she had undressed and he had watched as she dropped her white nightdress over her head, over the breasts which had funneled down to her middle, over the behind like a bellows, the thighs and calves veined blue like a roadmap. What once could be pinched, what once was small and tight, now could be poked and pulled. Everything hung.

(pp. 217-18)

For poor Epstein, "instead of smelling a woman between his sheets he smelled Bab-o."

The sounds accompanying the sexual high jinks of his daughter, Sheila, and her boyfriend reawaken a spark of sexual interest in Epstein which is turned into a flame when he discovers his nephew, Michael, making love to the girl next door, Linda Kaufman. Her mother, Ida, is the alluring widow who is the recipient of Lou's lust. Ida is everything Goldie is not and is able to give Lou what he needs; unfortunately, she also gives him a venereal rash! Goldie's discovery of the scarlet insignia is one of Roth's funniest scenes, surpassing even the inspired insanity of much of Portnoy's Complaint.

'You pig! Who, who was it!'
'I told you the shvartzes--'
'Liar! Pig!' Wheeling her way back to the bed, she flopped onto it so hard the springs squeaked. 'Liar!' And then she was off the bed pulling the sheets from it. 'I'll burn them, I'll burn every one! Epstein stepped out of the pajamas that roped his ankles and raced to the bed. 'What are you doing--it's not catching. Only on the toilet seat. You'll buy a little ammonia--'
'Ammonia!' she yelled, 'you should drink ammonia!'
'No,' Epstein shouted, 'no,' and he grabbed the sheets from her and threw them back over the bed, tucking them in madly, 'Leave it be--' He ran to
the back of the bed but as he tucked there Goldie raced around and ripped up what he had tucked in the front; so he raced back to the front while Goldie raced to the back. 'Don't touch me,' she screamed, 'don't come near me, you filthy pig! Go touch some filthy whore.' (pp. 228-29)

Ostracized by Goldie, the aesthetically disgusting Sheila and her pimply boyfriend, and even Michael, Lou returns to Ida's. Although it is not explicit, Lou suffers a nearly fatal heart attack while enjoying her charms. An ambulance is called and a comedy of errors ensues for the doctor who has to figure out who is actually Epstein's wife. Goldie finally asserts her identity and clambers aboard the ambulance. Her words epitomize the trap Epstein is in: "Lou, you'll live normal, won't you? Won't you?" All of the societal, familial, and personal forces which have conspired to keep Lou "normal" are victorious. His rebellion against the forces of social tyranny ends in abject defeat: "His tongue hung over his teeth like a dead snake."

The end of the story, Goldie's plea to the doctor that he cure Lou's rash, underlines the ephemeral nature of his rebellion.

The doctor looked at her. Then he lifted for a moment the blanket that covered Epstein's nakedness. 'Doctor, it's bad?' Goldie's eyes and nose were running.

'An irritation,' the doctor said.
She grabbed his wrist. 'You can clean it up?' 'So it'll never come back,' the doctor said, and hopped out of the ambulance. (p. 244)
The implication is clear; Epstein will never again be able to choose adultery as a means to personal freedom. It simply does not work out that way; the cost in suffering is too high.

In a piece preceeding the New York opening of Unlikely Heroes, Larry Arrick's dramatization of "Epstein," "Defender of the Faith," and "Eli, the Fanatic," Roth discusses the source of "Epstein." His account is noteworthy not only for the insight it gives into Roth's wonted transformation of personal experience into fiction, but also for the critical perspective it imparts.

I wrote 'Epstein' when I was twenty-four, ten years after my father had recounted a similar tale of neighborhood adultery during dinner one night—mealtime being Scheherazade-time in our kitchen. At fourteen I had been delighted to hear that scandalous passion had broken out on our decent, law-abiding street, but my pleasure derived especially from the blend of comedy and sympathy with which the story had been told. A decade later, when I set out to make fiction from this delicious bit of neighborhood gossip, I tried to be faithful to the point of view of the original narrator, which seemed to me morally astute and, in its unself-righteous gaiety and lustiness, endearing. In writing I of course shifted the story's intestines around to get at what I took to be the vital organs—and then tacked on a special cardiac seizure to give the story the brutal edge that Mr. Reality had strangely neglected to impart on this occasion.37

Roth's account gives the lie to Irving Howe's characterization of "Epstein" as a work of "disgust," reminding one

"of D.H. Lawrence's jibe about writers who 'do dirt' on their characters." As is evident, this is neither Roth's intention, nor the actuality of the short story. The ironies of the quest for personal freedom can even be dramatized in the world of the burlesque house.

Of the five stories published along with Goodbye, Columbus, the one which best exemplifies the issues and values of the "open decision" is "Defender of the Faith." This work provoked a firestorm of extra-literary criticism and promoted countless vehement and ill-founded charges of anti-Semitism on Roth's part. More on this matter later.

The narrator and protagonist, Sergeant Nathan Marx, is a much decorated Jewish veteran of the European theatre; in May of 1945 he is transferred to a training

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38 Howe, p. 73.

39 A discussion of the fifth and weakest story, "You Can't Tell A Man By The Song He Sings," is not germane to my purposes here. A real mishmash, it is one part cautionary tale on the origins and effects of McCarthyism, and one part remembrance of Newark past. I also will not discuss Goodbye, Columbus. Unlike the protagonists of the short stories analyzed thus far, Neil Klugman is not engaged in the business of choosing. Like Werner Samuelson, Neil is torn by the conflicting claims of materialism and some vague "artistic" sensibility. This conflict is structured around his relationship with Brenda Patimkin. Unlike Werner, Neil makes no real choice; Brenda is the one who makes all the decisions while Neil, although mentally tortured, remains passive to the end.
company in Camp Crowder, Missouri. A marginal Jew at best, he ironically receives an unsolicited and unwanted nomination as "defender of the faith" from the three Jewish draftees in the company: Sheldon Grossbart, Larry Fishbein, and Mickey Halpern. Marx's chief nemesis is Grossbart; the other two are merely feeble-minded foils in his various devious machinations.

Marx's initial self-evaluation is thematically significant and, as events are to prove, quite incorrect: "I had been fortunate enough to develop an infantryman's heart, which, like his feet, at first aches and swells but finally grows horny enough for him to travel the weirdest paths without feeling a thing." In Marx's struggle between head and heart, it is the latter which will prove susceptible to the manipulations of Grossbart. (Roth's early proclivity for overly-diagrammatic names is evidenced once again. Sheldon indeed will "grossly barter" on the basis of his shared Jewishness with Marx and the others.)

Grossbart immediately twists Marx's appearance in the camp to his own benefit. In order to avoid Friday night G.I. parties, he demands his religious "rights" to go to shul, and manipulates Marx into intervening with the brass: "Sergeant Thurston was one thing....but we thought that with you here things might be different."
At the service, Marx, who is "in search of more of me," thinks he overhears Grossbart exult, "Let the goyim clean the floors!"

Flushed with victory, Grossbart now demands the "right" to kosher food and even concocts a hair-brained scheme. Assuming the identity of his father, he writes a letter to his congressman complaining that the dietary laws are disregarded. He knows full well that the letter will be forwarded to the army and will trickle its way down through the bureaucracy to his commanding officer. This time Marx refuses to be suckered and plays "straight man" at the confrontation between the C.O. and Grossbart.

Barrett blew up. 'Look, Grossbart. Marx, here, is a good man--a goddam hero. When you were in high school, Sergeant Marx was killing Germans. Who does more for the Jews--you, by throwing up over a lousy piece of sausage, a piece of first-cut meat, or Marx, by killing those Nazi bastards? If I was a Jew, Grossbart, I'd kiss this man's feet. He's a goddam hero, and he eats what we give him. Why do you have to cause trouble is what I want to know. What is it you're buckin' for--a discharge?' (p. 194)

Although he denies it, to paraphrase Queen Gertrude in Hamlet, the draftee doth protest too much, methinks!

Marx puts two and two together and realizes that Grossbart is the real author of the letter. In reply to Marx's accusations, Grossbart, as "defender of the faith," claims that what he does is done for all of them. Marx is astonished and disgusted by his sophistry.
'You're a regular Messiah, aren't you?'
We were at the chow line now.
'That's a good one, Sergeant,' he said, smiling.
'But who knows? Who can tell? Maybe you're the Messiah--a little bit. What Mickey says is the Messiah is a collective idea. He went to Yeshiva, Mickey, for a while. He says together we're the Messiah. Me a little bit, you a little bit.'

(pp. 196-97)

All is grist for Grossbart's mill of self-aggrandizement.

A second letter from Grossbart's "father" to the congressman works its way through the chain of command and materializes. This one chronicles Grossbart's religious struggle over and final patriotic acceptance of army food. Profuse credit is given to none other but SERGEANT NATHAN MARX, who is understandably confused.

What was Grossbart's motive in recanting? Did he feel he'd gone too far? Was the letter a strategic retreat--a crafty attempt to strengthen what he considered our alliance? Or had he actually changed his mind, via an imaginary dialogue between Grossbart père and Grossbart fils? I was puzzled, but only for a few days--that is, only until I realized that, whatever his reasons, he had actually decided to disappear from my life; he was going to allow himself to become just another trainee. (pp. 198-99)

This judgment will prove to be as faulty as his earlier evaluation of his "infantryman's heart." Grossbart's "strategic retreat" has its desired effect: "Our separation allowed me to forgive him our past encounters, and, finally, to admire him for his good sense."

Grossbart's final manipulation revolves around the issue of a weekend pass, something strictly forbidden during basic training. Grossbart claims he needs the pass
in order to celebrate a Passover dinner with his aunt, even though Passover had occurred a month previous. When Marx refuses, Grossbart accuses him of persecution: He has learned precisely which strings to pluck—Marx's tenuous grasp of his own identity as a Jew.

'Grossbart, why can't you be like the rest? Why do you have to stick out like a sore thumb?'

'Because I'm a Jew, Sergeant. I am different. Better, maybe not. But different.'

'This is a war, Grossbart. For the time being be the same.'

'I refuse.'

'What?'

'I refuse. I can't stop being me, that's all there is to it.' Tears came to his eyes. 'It's a hard thing to be a Jew. But now I understand what Mickey says—it's a harder thing to stay one.' He raised a hand sadly toward me. 'Look at you.' (pp. 202-03)

Against Marx's better judgment, and after an incredible amount of finagling on Grossbart's part, he signs not one but three weekend passes for the bunch of them. In a bar later that afternoon, Marx rationalizes and recalls the lesson learned at his grandmother's knee: "mercy overrides justice."

What is the upshot of this victory of the heart over the head? Grossbart, who promised him some gefilte fish on his return, instead brings Marx Chinese egg roll—his aunt wasn't home, and, in lieu of the belated Passover meal, they "took second best."

'Grossbart, you're a liar!' I said. 'You're a schemer and a crook. You've got no respect for anything. Nothing at all. Not for me, for the
truth--not even for poor Halpern! You use us all.'
(p. 210)

Marx is consumed with fury: "It engulfed me, owned me, till it seemed I could only rid myself of it with tears or an act of violence." His only release is to throw the bag of egg roll out of the window.

With a vengeance, the manipulated turns manipulator.

A week later orders come for the trainees. All but Grossbart are to go to the Pacific; his orders read Monmouth, New Jersey. A choice is to be made. Marx discovers the string Grossbart pulled and pulls one of his own. He calls a friend of his, the non-com in charge of Classification and Assignment.

Bob Wright answered the phone. 'How are you, Nate? How's the pitching arm?'

'Good. Bob, I wonder if you could do me a favor.' I heard clearly my own words, and they so reminded me of Grossbart that I dropped more easily than I could have imagined into what I had planned. 'This may sound crazy, Bob, but I got a kid here on orders to Monmouth who wants to get them changed. He had a brother killed in Europe, and he's hot to go to the Pacific. Says he'd feel like a coward if he wound up Stateside. I don't know, Bob--can anything be done? Put somebody else in the Monmouth slot?' (p. 212)

The change of orders goes through. Grossbart's charge is predictable in its simplicity: "There's no limit to your anti-Semitism, is there?" He goes on to now deny his responsibility for Fishbein and Halpern, and proclaims his right to take care of himself. Grossbart's own words now come back to haunt him.
'For each other we have to learn to watch out Sheldon. You told me yourself.'
'You call this watching out for me--what you did?'
'No. For all of us.' (p. 214)

Paradoxically, Marx is now a true "defender of the faith." Grossbart, of course, does not understand what Marx means. His concern for "us" always merely has been a mask for self-aggrandizement. Furthermore, the "us" Marx refers to is not the same "us" Grossbart has used (in the pejorative sense of the word).

The story ends on a highly ambiguous note.

Over in the barracks, in the lighted windows, I could see the boys in their T-shirts sitting on their bunks talking about their orders, as they'd been doing for the past two days. With a kind of quiet nervousness, they polished shoes, shined belt buckles, squared away underwear, trying as best they could to accept their fate. Behind me, Grossbart swallowed hard, accepting his. And then, resisting with all my will an impulse to turn and seek pardon for my vindictiveness, I accepted my own. (p. 214)

A serious condemnation of Marx's act is made by Irving Malin.

When he punishes Grossbart, he calls it justice triumphing over mercy. But we wonder: Is Grossbart merely his scapegoat? Perhaps Marx punishes him because he cannot acknowledge his own 'grossness,' his own humanity. 40

Contrary to Malin's hypothesis, in the context of the "open decision," Marx's choice is that of humanity over the tribe. His is a victory of consciousness in that he refuses to be limited by Grossbart's definition of him. He is more than a Jew; he is a man. In the course of the story, he discovers the truth of this statement, thereby achieving a higher level of consciousness. Allen Guttmann focuses precisely on this aspect of the story:

Sergeant Marx calls himself vindictive, but he may also be seen as the defender of a democratic theory by which the accidents of birth give no exemption from our common fate. He acts from a sense of justice that is, finally, humanistic in its universality.\(^4\)

Not only does Marx choose, but he also accepts responsibility for his choice; more importantly, as Solotaroff argues, he accepts "the consequences of what he has done to defend it \(\wedge\) the faith\(^7\)."\(^4\)

This is the true meaning of the acceptance which closes the story. Unlike Werner Samuelson, Nathan Marx accepts his ambiguous nature. It is paradoxical that an action may be both vindictive and humanistic at the same time. Nevertheless, it is precisely this quality which

\(^{4}\text{Guttmann, p. 67.}\)

\(^{4}\text{Solotaroff, P. 25.}\)
gives "Defender of the Faith" what Howe terms its "texture of reality." This "ambivalent note" is therefore not "one that strains just a bit at credibility," as Sanford pinsker characterizes it, but part and parcel of one of the basic tenets of the "open decision:" "True consciousness brings with it a sense of wholeness though not completeness, for it acknowledges and affirms the ambiguities and paradoxes of which, by definition, the individual is constituted." (TOD, pp. 231-32)

With its focus on the shark-like maneuverings of Grossbart, it is not surprising that "Defender of the Faith" so aroused the ire of many Jewish readers. In "Writing About Jews," Roth delineates the cause for their thin-skinned and wrong-headed response to his fiction: "What will the goyim think?" Time and again, in his works, in symposia, in interviews and articles, Roth reiterates his answer to the charges of anti-Semitism and self-hatred. As Marx learns, he is more than a Jew, he is a man. Roth clearly and forcefully defines his position. "I am not a Jewish writer; I am a writer who is a Jew. The biggest concern and passion in my life is

43 Howe, p. 72.


45 "Writing About Jews," RMO, p. 156.
to write fiction, not to be a Jew."\(^{46}\) On one hand, this accounts for his choice of material: The writer must write about what he knows best.

What you take directly from life gives your imagination something to shoot for. You're challenging the imagination, saying to it, 'all right, let's see you do as well.' What's taken directly from life helps to place and fix a book's level of reality; it provides something against which to measure what you make up, so that in the end the invented experience will have the same kind of life, be equally persuasive and affecting. Of course, for everything in my fiction that connects to something I've known personally, there are a hundred things that have no connections, or connections of only the roughest and vaguest sort. But along the way you are sticking these hooks of direct experience into the work, hooks to hang on to as you move forward over everything that's as yet unknown to you.\(^{47}\)

On the other, his self-definition sets the priorities in his fiction.

My goal is not really to investigate Jewish life wherever it crops up and then to write fiction about it; I am interested in expression of human character and the mysterious connection between events and characters--who it is that causes what, and how it happened. This is not manifested only in Jewish life.\(^{48}\)

This overriding and clarifying fact must be kept in mind. Roth's "exploration of moral fantasy" has as its main concern not the Jews, but "men and women whose moorings

\(^{46}\) "Second Dialogue in Israel," Congress Bi-Weekly, 30 (September 16, 1963), 35.  
have been cut, and who are swept away from shore and out to sea."\textsuperscript{49} To ignore this perspective is a distortion of both his intention and artistic achievement.

\textsuperscript{49}Refer to text above, p. 4.
CHAPTER II

THE CLOSED DECISION

Curiously enough, I shall begin my investigation of Roth's novels with a consideration of his second novel, *When She Was Good*, published in 1967, a half decade after the appearance of *Letting Go*. I do so not out of perversity, but for good cause. Of the six novels I shall take up, *When She Was Good* is a true anomaly, and differs radically from the rest in its setting, main protagonist, point of view, and language.

Characteristically, a significant portion of each of the other novels is set in New York City. (*The Breast* takes place entirely in the city, but the nature of David Kepesh's predicament obviates the need for any "setting" as the word usually is understood.) Other cosmopolitan cities serve as well as the locale for the

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tortured sojourns of Roth's characters; London, Prague, Rome, San Francisco, and Chicago all figure prominently in his fiction. Their polar opposite is the provincial and ethnic world of Newark and the Catskills, so memorably rendered in *The Professor of Desire* and *Portnoy's Complaint*. A third characteristic setting is an academic oasis or artistic retreat such as the University of Iowa or the Quaysay Colony.

For the faithful reader of Roth, *When She Was Good* is an excruciating journey through a totally alien landscape: Small town America, the heart of the country. Liberty Center, indeterminately located somewhere north of Chicago, is "a town of small white houses shaded by big elms and maples, with a bandstand in the middle of Broadway, its main street." It is a town where "you leave your house unlocked, and you could go away for a week, for a month even, and not worry." This placid and secure exterior masks a terrible ferment and savage reality just below the surface.

The main protagonist of this, the darkest work in all of Roth's canon, is Lucy Nelson. Lucy shares but one of the characteristics common to Gabe Wallach, Alexander Portnoy, David Kepesh, and Peter Tarnopol, upper middle class Jewish intellectuals all. These men are studies in disintegration, deeply alienated and
isolated, full of guilt and self-doubt, yet struggling for wholeness. Lucy comes from a working class Protestant background; although she is as isolated and alienated as the others, guilt and self-doubt are strangers to her. For Lucy, the only time she ever was wrong was when she thought she had made a mistake. Indeed, Lucy is a monomaniac who suffers from the delusion that she is the avenging angel of righteousness.

Whereas Gabe Wallach, Alexander Portnoy, David Kepesh, and Peter Tarnopol are all narrators of their respective novels (although in the penultimate chapter of *Letting Go*, "The Mad Crusader," a gradual shift to the omniscient point of view is completed), *When She Was Good* is related entirely in the third person with shifting centers of consciousness. Appropriately, this technique achieves an effect of objectivity, thereby doing away with the confessional quality present in the other novels. Lucy Nelson adamantly has nothing to confess, either to God or man.

Just as the point of view is appropriate to the novel's focus, so is the language Roth utilizes. It, too, is radically different from the language of the other novels. In an interview, Roth defined both his intention and accomplishment.
When She Was Good is, above all, a story about small-town Middle Westerners who more than willingly experience themselves as conventional and upright people; and it is their own conventional and upright style of speech that I chose as my means of narration—or, rather, a slightly heightened, somewhat more flexible version of their language, but one that drew freely upon their habitual cliches, locutions, and banalities. It was not, however, to satirize them, in the manner, say of Ring Lardner's 'Haircut,' that I settled eventually on this modest style, but rather to communicate, by their way of saying things, their way of seeing things and judging them.2

The rationale given for this stylistic treatment is quite interesting and indicative of Roth's serious-minded and dedicated approach to the achievement of his artistic purposes. He goes on to raise Chekhov's distinction between "the solution of the problem and the correct presentation of the problem." For Roth, as for Chekhov, "only the latter is obligatory for the artist."3 The extent to which Roth takes this dictum to heart is evidenced in his analysis of the mental processes of Lucy's husband, Roy Bassart.

As for obscenity, I was careful, even when I had Roy Bassart, the young ex-G.I. in the novel, reflecting—had him safely walled up in his own head—to show that the farthest he could go in violating a taboo was to think 'f. this and f. that.' Roy's inability to utter more than the initial of that famous four-letter word, even to himself, was the point I was making.4

2 Roth, "On Portnoy's Complaint, RMO, p. 18.
3 Ibid., p. 18.
4 Ibid., p. 18.
The successful achievement of this difficult effect in large part accounts for the misapprehension on the part of many critics of When She Was Good.

In spite of these significant dissimilarities to the rest of the novels—in setting, choice of a main character, point of view, and language—as Roth points out, the basic subject matter remains the same: "the problematical nature of moral authority and of social restraint and regulation." So why consider When She Was Good totally apart from the rest? Should it not take its place as a stage in Roth's projectile directed at the barrier of consciousness through which David Kepesh finally passes? The answer is an emphatic, "No!"

The four superficial dissimilarities which have been noted pale in significance to the key issue which differentiates this novel from the rest. In developing his projectile analogy, Roth emphasizes "the ambiguous sense of personal imperatives and taboos" common to Gabe Wallach, Alexander Portnoy and David Kepesh. This "ambiguous sense" is totally lacking in Lucy Nelson. When She Was Good is a devastating dissection of the genesis, development and final tragic end of a consciousness diametrically opposed to that of the "open decision."

5Roth, "On The Great American Novel," RMO, p. 84.
6Ibid., p. 85.
The protagonists of the other novels are engaged in a bitter struggle to accept the paradox of human reality; Lucy rejects even the possibility that the essence of the human condition is chaos, ambiguity, and uncertainty. Life is a struggle for Lucy: the struggle to enforce her vision of what a man should be, an unequivocal vision of right and wrong.

Eventually, must not the truth prevail? Oh, it had not been in vain that she had sacrificed and struggled! Oh yes, of course! If you know you are in the right, if you do not weaken or falter, if despite everything thrown up against you, despite every hardship, every pain, you oppose what you know in your heart is wrong; if you harden yourself to the opinions of others, if you are willing to endure the loneliness of pursuing what is good in a world indifferent to good; if you struggle with every fiber of your body, even as others scorn you, hate you and fear you; if you push on and on and on, no matter how great the agony, how terrible the strain--then one day the truth will finally be known-- (p. 273)

For Lucy, the truth is unmistakably clear: "For they are wrong and you are right, and there is no choice: The good must triumph in the end!" Lucy's dogmatic vision is the quintessence of what Bryant terms a "limited viewpoint." Her denial of true consciousness is what dooms her to insanity and a hideous and early death.

The opening chapter of When She Was Good takes the form of a free association reminiscence on the part of Willard Carroll, the well-meaning but ineffectual patriarch of his extended family. Daddy Will, as he
ironically is known, is awaiting the homecoming of his prodigal son-in-law, Whitey Nelson, returning home from a stint in a Florida penitentiary for petty theft. Before he meets Whitey, Willard is drawn inexorably to the family plot where his sister, Ginny, and granddaughter, Lucy Nelson, are buried. The novel's opening words define the overriding purpose of Willard's life: "Not to be rich, not to be famous, not to be mighty, not even to be happy, but to be civilized--that was the dream of his life." The discrepancy between this dream and the reality of Willard's existence sets the ironic context of the novel.

In search of "civilization," a young Willard leaves his "fierce and ignorant" father and "slavish" mother in Iron City and settles one hundred and fifty miles south in Liberty Center.

If ever there was a place where life could be less bleak and harsh and cruel than the life he had known as a boy, if ever there was a place where a man did not have to live like a brute, where he did not have to be reminded at every turn that something in the world either did not like mankind, or did not even know of its existence, it was here, Liberty Center! Oh, sweet name! At least for him, for he was indeed free at last of that terrible tyranny of cruel men and cruel nature. (p. 6)

The freedom he perceives at eighteen is to be a frustrating illusion; with this characteristic burst of optimism, Willard has forgotten a traumatic lesson learned long ago in childhood. At the age of seven, his year old
sister was wracked by the tortures of scarlet fever. An ancient squaw brought Ginny a root which Willard desper-ately tried to feed her.

He was forcing it between her gums when the door opened. 'You--let her be, get away.' and so, help­less, he went off to bed, and had, at seven, his first terrifying inkling that there were in the universe forces even more remote from his desires, even more estranged from human need and feeling, than his own father. (p. 5)

Whereas Willard finally relearns this lesson and acquiesces in the face of "the terrible tyranny of cruel men and cruel nature," his granddaughter, Lucy, will do no such thing. She herself becomes the most terrifying elemental force in the novel.

In 1934, when Lucy is three years old, her mother and father, Myra and Whitey, come to stay with Willard and his wife, Berta. The "temporary" stay lengthens to sixteen years of "living off the fat of another fellow's land, which wasn't so fat either."

Whitey's life is a tedious succession of "things.... overwhelming him." The "things" are both external and internal, impersonal historical forces and personal deficiencies.

As it turned out, Whitey took the Great Depression very personally. It was as though a little baby, ready to try its first step, stands up, smiles, puts out one foot, and one of those huge iron balls such as they used to knock down whole buildings comes swinging out of nowhere and whallops him right between the eyes. In Whitey's case it took nearly ten years for him to get the nerve to stand up and
even try walking again. On Monday, December 8, 1941, he took the bus down to Fort Kean to enlist in the United States Coast Guard, and was rejected for heart murmur. (p. 28)

Of course, by Whitey's lights, neither the Depression nor the heart murmur are his fault; they conveniently fully account for his behavior, which only now, in his revery, Willard is able to call "by its rightful name—lack of character."

Lengthening periods of drunkenness all to briefly punctuated by "fresh starts" conclude one fateful evening when he blackens Myra's eye with a belt. He characteristically disappears for three days; when Whitey penitently resurfaces, the now eighteen year old pregnant Lucy locks him out of the house. He leaves, seemingly for good, with Lucy's excommunication from the human race ringing in his ears: "Mother, the man is beyond hope! Beyond everything!" Whitey is not to return for nearly five years and only after the death of his daughter.

The frightening power that Lucy has over Whitey is obviously not limited to him alone nor mitigated by death. Suddenly, Willard realizes his motivation in visiting the graveyard and recapitulating the entire litany of tears.

'Oh hell, the fellow is nearly fifty--what else can I even do?' He was speaking aloud now, as he drove on into town. 'There is a job waiting for him over in Winnisaw. That has all been arranged, and with his say-so, with his wanting it, with his asking for it. As for the moving in, that is
absolutely temporary. Believe me, I am too old for that other stuff. What we are planning is January the first....Oh, Look,' he cried to the dead, 'I am not God in heaven! I did not make the world! I cannot predict the future! Damn it anyway, he is her husband--that she loves, whether we like it or not!' (pp. 39-40)

Roth's device of revealing the broad outline and climax of his story in the first forty pages is obviously rather risky. It is to his credit that he pulls it off extremely well. Paradoxically, rather than undercut his dramatic effect, the knowledge of Lucy's death serves to heighten it. What we know is that Lucy dies; what we are to learn is the why and the wherefore--and, most importantly, the source of her power over others in life and death. Furthermore, the telling of the story from different perspectives (a technique carried much further in My Life As a Man) underscores the ambiguous nature of reality. By implication, no one story is the story. The structure of the novel, therefore, stands in mute opposition to the dogmatism of its heroine.

With the second chapter, Roth shifts his focus from Willard to Roy Bassart. It is the summer of 1948. Roy is freshly discharged from the army where he has served an uneventful tour of duty in the Aleutians. Although he is not conscious of it, the army has provided him with a respite from the narrow provincial world of Liberty Center. For the first time in his life, Roy is
exposed to progressive thinking. Heretofore a complacent participant and proponent of the American Way of Life, he suffers a mild contamination of socialist ideology, even going so far as to flirt with the idea of emigration to Sweden.

As for sex, whereas in high school he was simply the thrall of his desires, Roy begins to reflect on the "problem." He comes to agree with the barracks philosopher, Lingelbach, who divines that "the trouble with most girls in the U.S.A. was that they thought sex was something obscene, when it was probably the most beautiful experience, physical or spiritual, that a person could ever have." Of more practical use to him is the advice given by the "fat mouth," Cuzka:

All you have to do to make a girl spread her chops....is to tell her you love her. You just keep saying it over and over and finally ('I don't care who they are, I don't care if they're Maria Montez') they can't resist. Tell them you love them and tell them to trust you....Just keep saying, 'Trust me, baby, trust me,' and meanwhile start unzipping the old fly. (pp. 62-63)

When the first argument fails, Lucy will be the recipient of Cuzka's sure-fire tactics. The "hottest and heaviest" sex Roy had previously known was with Bev Collison, whom he spent his entire senior year attempting to seduce. The apogee of his sex life is pathetically laughable: "Then on the Saturday before graduation it happened; in the pitch-black living room he got two fingers onto her
nipple. Bare."

Also, for the first time, Roy experiences vague "artistic" stirrings. He starts to draw, but, unfortunately, never is able to navigate the treacheries of the mouth. Back home in Liberty Center, he is moved by the sight of a river to compose an embarrassing poem comparing water to time. Ignorant of Heraclitus, he is struck by the originality of his perception. Recognizing the failure of these endeavors, Roy finally takes up photography.

Upon his return to civilian life Roy's plans are vague, to say the least: "He didn't know what to do with his future, so he sat around for six months listening to people talk about it." What he does do is eat, especially his beloved Hydrox cookies. At least this is done methodically; Roy separates each cookie, "eating first the bare half, then the half to which the filling had adhered." When he is not eating, he wanders aimlessly about his old haunts, especially the football practice field where he fantasizes about the cheerleaders he never had and those he never will have.

While accomplishing nothing of substance, Roy manages to burnish the patina of sophistication which he has brought home with him from the army. He scandalizes his doting mother by drinking pots of "hot joe," and condescends to the high school "kids" he hangs around.
All in all, Roy thinks of himself as a man of the world. He also prides himself on his individuality: "You lost your identity in a gang, and Roy considered himself a little too much of an individualist for that. Not a loner, but an individualist, and there's a difference."

This self-perception, coupled with Roy's artistic yearnings, move him to refuse his Uncle Julian Sowerby's offer to enter into his thriving laundromat business. Above all, he savors his freedom.

Oh, brother, was it good to be free. With a whole life ahead of him. A whole future, in which he could be and do anything he wanted. (p. 53)

Such is the young innocent who will soon meet his doom in the person of Lucy Nelson.

The remainder of the novel, except for the last page, has Lucy as its center of consciousness. She is no ordinary child. By the time she is in the fifth grade, her father is an alcoholic, firmly ensconced in Earl's Dugout of Buddies. In order to supplement the meager income which Willard brings in as a postal clerk, Myra is forced to take on piano students in their home. The humiliation and shame Lucy feels in regard to her parents soon burgeons into full-blown paranoia. Rather than allow her classmates into her home after school, Lucy invents the story that her grandmother naps at that time. One day a new girl in town giggles at her story "and Lucy
knew that somebody had already cornered Mary Beckley and told her Lucy's secret." Mary's explanation that she laughed only because her baby sister also took naps is rejected out of hand.

Only, Lucy didn't believe her. And from then on she refused ever to tell a lie again, to anyone about anything; from then on she brought no one to her home, and did not offer explanations for her behavior either. (p. 76)

This refusal at the age of ten is the first inkling of the self-righteousness which will come to dominate her every relationship.

The next incident to clearly reflect the development of Lucy's world view takes place during her sophomore year of high school. She becomes as intimate as she possibly can with the poor Kitty Egan, who lives in "nothing more than a dilapidated old shack." It soon becomes quite apparent why Kitty is befriended: Her family history, intellectual abilities, and financial condition are all inferior to Lucy's. What she does have is her Catholic faith and belief in Saint Teresa of Lisieux, the Little Flower, whose The Story of A Soul is her passport to "heaven for all eternity." Despising "both herself and her narrow Protestant background," and attracted by what she perceives to be the certainties offered by Catholicism, Lucy begins the process of conversion under the spiritual guidance of Father Damrosch
and Sister Angelica of the Passion. Kitty and Lucy "both chose what Sister Angelica called 'Saint Teresa's little way of spiritual childhood,' "whose precepts are submission, humility, silence and suffering."

The conversion and friendship with Kitty is abruptly terminated one night when Whitey comes home to find Myra soaking her feet in a pan of water and Epsom salts after a long day of teaching piano. In a drunken rage, he accuses her of flaunting her martyrdom and upends the pan of water onto the rug. Lucy's response is terrible and swift. "After calling upon Saint Teresa of Lisieux and Our Lord--and getting no reply--she called the police." Kitty is written off, and Saint Teresa fares no better; "And as for Saint Teresa, that Little Flower, the truth was, Lucy couldn't stand her suffering little guts." Out of the same motivation, she rejects personally returning to Father Damrosch the rosary, veil, and crucifix given her. "He would try to teach her to love to suffer. But she hated suffering as much as she hated those who made her suffer, and she always would." At the church where she means to leave the artifacts, Lucy momentarily weakens and imagines that Father Damrosch is waiting for her.

And tell her what? This life is a prelude to the next? She didn't believe it. There is no next life; This is what there is, Father Damrosch. This!
Now! And they are not going to ruin it for me! I will not let them! I am their superior in every single way! People can call me all the names they want—I don't care! I have nothing to confess, because I am right and they are wrong and I will not be destroyed. (p. 84)

To the self-righteousness that Lucy evidenced at the age of ten is added a bizarre new element of absolutism and authoritarianism. The inefficacy of her prayers results in the rechanneling of her quest for absolute truth; it is to be found not in the "hocus-pocus" of religion, but Lucy herself will be the final arbiter of what is true and good and just. And woe betide any man who does not measure up to her exacting standards.

In her senior year of high school, Lucy enters into an on-again, off-again relationship with Ellie Sowerby, a spoiled rich girl to whom she feels "superior in every way imaginable, except for looks, which she didn't care that much about; and money, which meant nothing; and clothes; and boys." It is through the Sowerby's the Lucy meets Roy, who is Ellie's cousin. Their courtship manages to touch all of the mandatory bases before Roy finally half cajoles, half rapes her in the back seat of his two tone 1946 Hudson.

'Angel,' he moaned into her ear. 'Roy, no, please.' 'It's okay,' he whispered, 'it's all right--' 'Oh, it's not!' 'But it is, oh, it is, I swear,' he said, and then he assured her that he would use a technique he had heard about in the Aleutians, called inter-
ruption. 'Just trust me,' he pleaded, 'trust me, trust me,' and alas, she wanted to so badly, she did. (p. 112)

That Roy's victory shall prove to be Pyrrhic is an understatement.

In order to be close to her, he enters the Britannia School of Photography and Design in Fort Kean where Lucy is enrolled in the women's state college. His decision is an indication to Lucy that Roy lacks the necessary seriousness in planning for his future. His fall in her favor--limited as it is--is rapid. After several other decisions she questions, Lucy finally resolves to dump this "inferior." In an action pointedly symbolic of her need to be in control, Lucy "with a thick black crayon...circled on her calendar the day she would make it altogether clear their romance was over (at the same time x-ing out another day of her life in Liberty Center: fifty-eight to go)." Events and the desire to gently rid herself of Roy conspire to delay the enactment of her decision until it is too late. Just before Thanksgiving, Lucy discovers she is pregnant.

Rather than go to Roy, she visits the campus doctor who ignores her thinly veiled insinuations that an abortion is in order. His rejection triggers a characteristic outburst.
'Oh,' she said, buttoning her coat, 'oh, I hope--I hope you're happy, Doctor, when you go home to your nice house. I hope you're happy with all your wisdom and your glasses and your doctor's degree--and being a coward!'

'Goodbye,' he said, blinking only once. 'Good luck.'

'Oh, I won't rely on luck, Doctor. Or on people either.'

'On what, then?'

'Myself!' she said, and marched through the open door. (p. 147)

Cowardice is the standard judgment whenever any man goes against her; at one point or another in the novel each important male has this charge leveled against him.

The Thanksgiving holiday is a complete fiasco. Roy is unable to tell his family the truth and Lucy sees no reason to. Her family's acceptance of the news fills her with loathing and disgust. As her flirtation with Catholicism evidenced, what Lucy really craves is an authoritarian answer to the complexities of living.

If only they'd say no. NO, LUCY, YOU CANNOT. NO, LUCY, WE FORBID IT. But it seemed that none of them had the conviction any longer, or the endurance, to go against a choice of hers. In order to survive, she had set her will against theirs long ago--it was the battle of her adolescence, but it was over now. And she had won. She could do whatever in the world she wanted--even marry someone she secretly despised. (p. 153)

When Roy tells her that he has not yet informed his parents of their plans she abruptly leaves for her empty dormitory in Fort Kean.

The following Monday she returns and informs the family of her pregnancy. It seems that she will have what
she originally wanted when her father suggests she have an abortion. When the fact escapes that her mother has had one from the same doctor she is to go to, Lucy is enraged. After condemning her father as a coward, she bitterly berates her mother.

'You let him trample on your dignity, Mother! You were his doormat! His slave!' 'Lucy, I did what was necessary,' she said, sobbing. 'That's not always right, though. You have to do what's right!' 'It was.' She spoke as in a trance. 'It was, it was--'

'It wasn't! Not for you! He degrades you, Mother, and you let him! Always! All our lives!' 'Oh, Lucy, whatever we say, our suggestions, you refuse.' 'I refuse--I refuse to live your life again, Mother, that's what I refuse!' (pp. 187-88)

This refusal will determine her position at every step of her relationship with Roy.

The marriage takes place at Christmas. That June, Lucy locks out her father, and four days later Edward is born. With his birth, "the honeymoon came to an end" for Roy. He drops out of Britannia certain that the instruction given by the "pansy," H. Harold LaVoy, is worthless. Nevertheless, through LaVoy's good offices he becomes assistant to Wendell Hopkins, society photographer of Fort Kean. In this position, Roy's artistic pretensions are smothered in an endless round of "photographing church socials, Rotary dinners, ladies'-club meetings, Little League games--and, most frequently,
grade and high school graduation classes." This mundane routine is a far cry from the exciting prospects Roy imagined awaited him as an "artist": "What he had a taste for was adventure, something to test himself against, some way to discover just how much of an individual he really was." This is not to say that the ideal is ever seriously put to the test. Photography is always merely a means to something else for him. For example, at the beginning of their relationship, Roy does a series of black and white studies of Lucy solely to win her over. Later on, he does not aspire to the artistry of an Ansel Adams, but does dream of his own studio where he can pirate Hopkins' clients. In short, Roy is a thoroughgoing bourgeois.

Frustration marks not only his professional life, but his family life as well. Lucy is ever mindful of her sacred vow: "She would not repeat her mother's life, nor would her offspring repeat her own." She comes more and more to unconsciously identify Roy with her no-account father. A series of parallels, both significant and insignificant, explicit and implicit, develops between the two men.

The first great confrontation occurs immediately after the birth of Edward. Roy suggests that the three of them move in with his parents over the summer. In answer
to his long-winded and convoluted arguments he receives a thundering, "No!" No other explanation is granted: Simply, "No!" What bothers Lucy is never stated, but obvious nonetheless. She has had fifteen years of living in someone else's home, a state of affairs which also was to be "temporary." She will not repeat the past.

When Edward becomes older, even the games Roy plays with him are a source of irritation to Lucy. Each night upon Roy's arrival, Ed runs to him, is caught up in his father's arms and twirled in the air, while Roy exclaims, "Well, I'll be darned. I will be absolutely darned. It's the original Edward Q. Bassart himself." Lucy's exasperated response: "No! No!—for suppose the tiny, innocent, laughing child were to take his father for a man, and grow up in his image." Although she professes no remembrance of it, a similar game was played each evening between Whitey and Lucy. She would jump from the dining room window seat while her father would cry out, "Hey, Lucy yumped! Yump again, Lucy-Goosie."

A series of confrontations takes place over the issues of Roy's dream of opening up his own studio. Again, the parallel is not verbalized by Lucy, but his desire is more than vaguely reminiscent of some of Whitey's "fresh starts," especially his dream of starting his own electrical contracting business. Lucy's response is to
scoff at his impracticality. After a particularly vicious battle, Roy bursts into tears and disappears for an entire day, as was Whitey's wont. This happens more than once. Finally, with Uncle Julian's instigation he proposes a separation. When Lucy discerns Julian's hand in the proposal, he becomes her greatest enemy. In the manner of a general fighting a two front war, she focuses her attention on the greater threat. The first skirmish is won with the unwitting aid of Roy's father, who counsels his son to face up to his responsibilities. He returns and Lucy forces him to promise he will never again have anything to do with the Sowerbys.

Over a year later the drama comes to an end. On the occasion of a visit from Ellie to the Bassarts, a reconciliation is attempted by Roy. Since Lucy feels she has "won," she decides to accept an invitation to the Sowerbys. Roy and Ed go on, while she first returns to Willard's. There she finds her mother nearly in a catatonic state. With much difficulty she wheedles the truth out of her grandfather. Whitey is in the Florida penitentiary for a theft in the hotel in which he was employed. He compulsively stole a handful of valuables after receiving a letter from Myra requesting a divorce so that she can remarry.

Back home in Fort Kean all hell breaks loose.
Lucy irrationally lashes out at Roy, and recapitulates almost word for word the same excommunication she pronounced on her father at fifteen.

'Oh,' she said, breathing hard, 'how I despise you, Roy. Every word you speak, everything you do, or try to do, it's awful. You're nothing, and I will never forgive you--'

He put his hands over his ears and wept.

'Never, never,' she said, 'because you are beyond hope. Beyond endurance. You are beyond everything. You can't be saved. You don't even want to be.'

'Lucy, Lucy, no, that's not true.'

'LaVoy,' she said disgustedly.

'--what?'

'LaVoy's not the pansy, Roy. You are.'

'No, oh no.'

'Yes! You! Oh, go!' She dropped back onto the sofa. 'Disappear. Leave me, leave me, just get out of my sight.' (p. 265)

That is precisely what he does. He takes Edward and flees to his Uncle's in Liberty Center. Lucy catches the last bus and at one in the morning appears at the Sowerbys, an avenging fury. Just before Julian answers the door, she has a vision.

No! She closed her eyes to shut out the worst until the worst is known; she pressed the doorbell, heard its ring, and saw her father sitting in a cell in the Florida State Prison. He is sitting on a three-legged stool wearing a striped uniform. There is a number on his chest. His mouth is open and on his teeth, in lipstick, is written INNOCENT. (p. 272)

While Roy skulks upstairs, the long-awaited confrontation with Julian takes place. She accuses him of kidnapping and whoremongering (a fact dredged up from her past association with Ellie), and Roy of dereliction of duty.
In Julian she meets her match. He will not buckle in to the "little bitch."

...he turned angrily back to Lucy. 'Because that's all you are you know. A little ball-breaker of a bitch. That's the saint you are, kiddo--Saint Ball-Breaker. And the world is going to know it, too, before I'm through with you.' (p. 279)

Roy appears. Not only does he reject her demands that he accept his duty, but he even stops her from getting to Edward. She strikes out at him and once again has her vision: "INNOCENT." The fusion of Whitey and Roy in her deranged mind is completed. Lucy lapses into total madness.

Willard arrives and drives her home. On the way, she has a nightmarish hallucination populated by the figures of Father Damrosch, Sister Angelica, Kitty—her father, and her self. Significantly, Roy is totally absent. Real events and imagined commingle, shift in and out of focus, and fade away. At the core is Lucy's obsession with her father and the unanswerable question, "Oh, why can't people be good?"

Lucy snaps out of her state in time for one last good swipe at her family. Willard is her first object of scorn: "The world is full of fiends and monsters, and you do absolutely nothing, and you never did!" She goes to her mother who is feigning sleep: "It would be easier if you could bring yourself to sit up and face me.
It would certainly be more dignified, Mother." She discovers Whitey's letter on her mother's bed: "Mother, he is who destroyed our lives." As she runs away with the letter, it is Berta's turn: "You selfish, selfish...." Once outside, she decides to go to the police, but changes her mind when she realizes the probable outcome.

But where to now? Because she knew what it would mean to continue on to the police station, she knew what Julian Sowerby would try to do; she knew the use to which such a man would put this opportunity, how he would seize it to destroy her, once and for all. Yes, because she knew right from wrong, because she saw her duty and did it, because she knew the truth and spoke it, because she would not sit by and endure treachery and betrayal, because she would not let them steal her little boy, and coddle a grown-up man, and scrape out of her body the new life beginning to grow there--they would try to make it seem that she was the guilty party, that she was the criminal. (pp. 302-03)

Her isolation and alienation is complete. "No, there was only one person she would rely upon; it was now as it had always been--the one to save her was herself."

Three nights later her body is found by some young lovers out in Passion Paradise where Roy first seduced her. Frozen to her cheek and hand is the letter from her father.

So Lucy dies, the victimizer victimized by her own militant rejection of the human condition. Roth painstakingly chronicles the progression to her frenzied doom: the happy toddler, the self-conscious child, the authoritarian adolescent, the insane adult. As in his
other fiction, individual integrity is the key issue in the novel. Paradoxically, Lucy, the self-perceived champion of individual integrity, violates not only others, but ultimately herself. Roth focuses on this brutal reality when he writes, "That a passion for freedom--chiefly from the bondage of a heartbreaking past--plunges Lucy Nelson into a bondage more gruesome and ultimately insupportable is the pathetic and ugly irony on which the novel turns." A gruesome bondage is indeed the wretched consequence of Lucy's "limited viewpoint." Roth tellingly adumbrates the basic components of her deficiency of consciousness in three representative incidents.

The first is an event recollected by Willard which functions as a poignant synecdoche of the novel as a whole. During Lucy's childhood, Ginny "seemed always to think that Lucy was somehow herself--that is, more Ginny, or the rest of Ginny, or the Ginny people called Lucy." Not only did she vicariously experience both Lucy's joys and sorrows, but she even adamantly refused to be separated from her. When time came for Lucy to go to kindergarten, Ginny would stand in the schoolyard

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calling out, "Loo-cy....Loo-cy...." The aftermath of this repeated behavior is predictable; under pressure from school authorities, Willard regretfully returns Ginny to the "home for the feebleminded" from whence he had rescued her. "And why? Because she could not understand the most basic fact of human life, the fact that I am me and you are you." Lucy herself will lose sight of this "most basic fact," especially in her relationship with Roy. In effect, feeblemindedness becomes a metaphor for Lucy's level of consciousness.

Another glimpse into the workings of her mind graphically reveals an almost fascistic will to power. In high school, Lucy plays the snare drum in the marching band, and finds performing the National Anthem "thrilling" and "truly glorious."

It was the moment of the week she had come to live for, but not because of anything so ridiculous as school spirit—or even love of country, which she supposed she had, though not more than an ordinary person. It wasn't the flag, snapping in the breeze, that gave her the gooseflesh so much as the sight of everybody in the stands rising as it moved down the field. She saw from the corner of her eye the arms sweep up, the hats swept off.... (p. 85)

Obviously, the illusion of being in control of the masses is what appeals to her so strongly. As Bryant cautions, such "dreams of absolute power" illustrate a refusal to

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8 Irving Malin focuses on this aspect of Lucy's condition in "Mad Crusader," Progressive, 31 (July 1967), 34.
"live the human condition as it is given." (TOD, p. 257)

A final component which defines the perimeter of Lucy's "limited viewpoint" is her rejection of faith. As was indicated in the discussion of "The Conversion of the Jews," human reality is seen as the paradox of rationality and irrationality. Faith, the rejection of mere rationality, therefore becomes a benchmark of the highest consciousness. Although Lucy is drawn to Catholicism for the wrong reasons, religious faith would definitely reflect a movement to a higher level of consciousness. This, of course, does not take place; indeed, as Meeter attests, When She Was Good is largely the story of a woman who refuses conversion, who tries to change her condition by insisting that others undergo a change of heart."

As my discussion of Roy Bassart as well as several of the short stories suggests, Roth does not deal merely with the individual in isolation, but with "the individual in society." The validity of this judgment is quite apparent from an examination of both his fiction and criticism.

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9 Meeter, p. 34.

10 McDaniel, xi. According to McDaniel, Roth's "central artistic concern."
Roth's first definition of his artistic posture, the seminal essay "Writing American Fiction," delineates precisely the problems he has contended with his entire career.

...the American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make credible much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it even is a kind of embarrassment to one's own meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist.11

Roth argues that a "loss of subject" ensure--"a voluntary withdrawal of interest by the fiction writer from some of the grander social and political phenomena of our times."12 He proceeds to supply ample evidence from the fiction of Salinger, Malamud, Bellow, and others of a pernicious retreat to the self, an exclusion of the "real" world. This, according to Roth, is a grievous error "for to the writer the community is, properly, both subject and audience."13 The hero of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man exemplifies the proper relationship to the world for his own protagonists:

11 Roth, "Writing American Fiction," RMQ, p. 120.
12 Ibid., p. 124.
13 Ibid., p. 134.
"He has gone out into it, and out into it, and out into it." This, then accounts for Roth's concern not only with Lucy's deficiency of consciousness, but also with what Bryant terms "the obstacles of social tyranny."
The interpenetration of these two concerns is reflected in Roth's summary of his tale.

....a Middlewestern girl, disappointed in her long-suffering mother, infuriated with her alcoholic father, is impregnated by a boyish ex-GI, just home from his two year confinement in the army; rather against his will, she persuades him "to do his duty by her" and as a consequence of this decision (which had seemed to her the only one that was 'moral'), she discovers herself imprisoned once again in a family situation no more loving or dignified than the one from which she had just escaped. As I remember it, what most intrigued me at the outset was the utter victimization of this girl, whose misfortune it was to have been born into a world to which she believed herself morally superior. What it took me nearly four years to discover and articulate was not only the exact price, in pain and deprivation, that the girl whom I called Lucy Nelson would have to pay for the circumstances of her youth, but the price that she would make others pay in turn.

As the summary suggests, her most immediate obstacle to personal fulfillment is the family. Roy's evaluation presents the conventional wisdom against which the reality of family life is contrasted.

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14 Roth, "Writing American Fiction," RMO, p. 135.

15 From the Literary Guild Preview, quoted in Gainville Hicks, "A Bad Little Good Girl," Saturday Review, 50 (June 17, 1967), 25.
Marriage isn't something that you enter into idly, or that you dissolve idly either. The more he thought about it the more he realized that marriage was probably the most serious thing you did in your whole life. After all, the family was the backbone of society. Take away the family, and what do you have? People just running around, that's all. Total anarchy. (p. 220)

The horrible truth is that the family actually "violates the integrity of individuality."[16]

Examples of the estrangement between parent and child abound. Perhaps the most evocative is Willard's experience with Ginny's illness. Certainly, the quality of Lucy's relationship with her father is unspeakable. In the novel's final paroxysm, little Edward's petrified reaction ("I hate Mommy, her face was all black") to Lucy's irrational outbursts against Roy is a dagger in her heart, and contributes mightily to her descent into madness.

If estrangement marks the parent-child relationship, marriage is a Strindbergian abyss. Evidently, the best one can hope for is an armed truce such as that between Willard and Berta. More likely is the total capitulation of one partner to the other as with Myra to Whitey or Irene to Julian Sowerby, the venal, lecherous "whoremonger" who is the only man capable of battling Lucy to

a draw. Of course, no one's integrity is more violated than Roy's, as Lucy attempts to compel him to accept his duties and responsibilities.

Roy's banal cliche about the family being "the backbone of society" is true, although not in the way that he means it. The family is indeed a microcosm of the larger society, a point that Roth is at pains to make in his critical pronouncements. Interestingly enough, one working title for When She Was Good was In the Middle Of America, and an excerpt which appeared in Harper's was titled "O Beautiful for Spacious Skies." The implication is inescapable.

Although Roy calls Lucy "Typical American Girl," his perception should not be mistaken for Roth's. She is not the product of a typical American family; however, Roth initially did view her "limited viewpoint" as symptomatic of a societal malaise endemic to our shores.

...though we are, to be sure, not a nation of Lucy Nelsons, there is a strong American inclination to respond to life like a Lucy Nelson--an inclination to reduce the complexities and mysteries of living to the most simple-minded and childish issues of right and wrong. How deeply this perverse moralistic bent has become embedded in our national character and affected our national life is, I realize, a matter for debate; that it is even 'perverse' is not a judgment with which everyone will readily agree. What destroys Lucy (some readers may hold) has nothing whatsoever to do with the rest of us. I am of a different opinion.17

17Hicks, pp. 25-26.
Seven years later, Roth made more explicit, yet retreated from, his correlation of Lucy Nelson to the national character; in an interview, he disclosed that "there was a time [Italics mine] when I at least associated the rhetoric employed by the heroine of When She Was Good to disguise from herself her vengeful destructiveness with the kind of language our government used when they spoke of 'saving' the Vietnamese by means of systemic annihilation." 18 The qualifying phrase, "there was a time," signals a significant shift in Roth's perception of the novel; not only is the original synecdoche--Lucy Nelson as emblem of the national character--rather strained, but subsequent geo-political events served to temper Roth's condemnation. In spite of governmental abuses, American citizens were spared the "daily awareness of government as a coercive force" experienced by their Czech and Chilean counterparts: "In sharp contrast.... we hadn't personally to fear for our safety and could be as outspoken as we liked, but this did not diminish the sense of living in a country with a government morally out of control and wholly in business for itself." 19


19 Ibid., p. 11.
An extremely important distinction is drawn: The American people are not the government and the government is not the American People.

The fact that the novel operates on four distinct levels was not lost on its more perceptive reviewers. Not only was it hailed as "the definitive portrait of the Great American Bitch," but along with the other fiction, it indicated that Roth had "seen, felt, and thought everything crucial to an understanding of American family life." Shifting to a third level of meaning, several critics recognized it as being about a "corrupt community." Ultimately, Roth's concern with the larger society (as emphasized in "Writing American Fiction") is appropriately underscored. Perhaps the reviewer from the Times Literary Supplement put it best: "When She Was Good is a stringent criticism of the core of Manifest Destiny, that mass-living level of smugness which demands

22 O'Connell, p. 54.
surrender to the American Way as model with a self-righteousness blind to its destructiveness."23 Roth's achievement is that the novel works on all four levels; the end result is greater than the sum of its parts.

Not all of the critics were nearly so sanguine in their evaluations of When She Was Good. Some were downright nasty. No longer was Roth blasted as a self-hating anti-Semite; with the publication of When She Was Good, he graduated to the status of a venomous misanthrope. Robert Alter described the novel as "a vendetta against human nature, at least in its characteristic American manifestations."24 Similarly, Robert Garis condemned Roth for "malice" resulting in the "cold persecution of his characters."25 The award for the most colorful piece of vituperation surely must go to Irving Howe, who took the novel to task for betraying


24 Robert Alter, "When He Is Bad," Commentary, 44 (November 1967), 86.

"a swelling nausea before the ordinariness of human existence, its seepage of spirit and rotting of flesh."\textsuperscript{26} Perhaps the rhetoric employed itself effects an unconscious betrayal! In any case, the highly subjective and idiosyncratic nature of these judgments cannot be dealt with logically. Where one reader perceives "cold persecution," another detects a "sense of pity."\textsuperscript{27} The latter view, I must say, is much closer to my experience of the novel. To be sure, sympathy is commingled with repugnance; however, at no time do I feel that Roth is engaged in a "vendetta against human nature." As proof, we conclude appropriately enough with Lucy's own pathetic words; the inability to apply her analysis of "Ozymandias" to her own life defines and foreshadows the tragic end of Saint Lucy:

Even a great king....such as Ozymandias apparently had been, could not predict or control what the future, or Fate, held in store for him and his kingdom; that, I think, is the message that Percy Bysshe Shelley, the poet, means for us to come away from his romantic poem 'Ozymandias,' which not only reveals the theme of the vanity of human wishes--even a king's--but deals also with the concept of the immensity of 'boundless and bare' life and the inevitability of the 'colossal wreck' of everything, as compared to the 'sneer of cold command,' which is all many mere mortals have at their command, unfortunately. (p. 183)

\textsuperscript{26}Howe, p. 74.

\textsuperscript{27}Charles Angoff, Chicago Jewish Forum, 26 (Winter 1967/68), 151.
CHAPTER III

STAGE ONE: LETTING GO

Letting Go\(^1\) is Roth's first attempt to practice what he preached in "Writing American Fiction," that is, the struggle to "understand, describe, and then make credible much of American reality." Subtle in its exploration of moral consciousness, mercilessly brutal in its investigation of the quotidian, Letting Go is a complex, demanding, and at times wearying affair. The highly ambiguous nature of the title both prefigures and reflects the novel's complexity. The phrase "letting go" encompasses a multiplicity of meanings: misperceptions of the self, emotions, relationships, responsibilities—warranted and unwarranted—all are either let go of or held onto by each character in the course of the novel.

\(^1\)Philip Roth, Letting Go (New York: Bantam Books, 1963). Parenthetical numbers in the text and footnotes are page references to this edition of the novel.
At times, to let go of any of these realities is admirable and necessary for personal growth; at other times, to do so is reprehensible, an abrogation of responsibility and, therefore, inauthentic behavior. Each character must struggle with the mysteries and uncertainties implicit in reaching a decision: To let go or not to let go.

Gabe Wallach, a Jewish academic of independent means, narrates roughly half the novel. Letting Go opens with a letter to him from his dying mother, Anna. More apology than apologia, the letter details the main failing of her life.

Since I was a little girl, I always wanted to be Very Decent to People. Other little girls wanted to be nurses and pianists. They were less dissembling. I was clever, I picked a virtue early and hung on to it. I was always doing things for another's good. The rest of my life I could push and pull at people with a clear conscience. (p. 2)

In revulsion against her manipulations and their concomitant bitter effects (especially on his father), Gabe vows "that I would do no violence to human life; not to another's, and not to my own." As Alfred Kazin shrewdly notes, much of Letting Go is about "the pretentiousness, strain, and cruelty of people trying to live by unfulfillable notions of themselves."²

Such is most assuredly the case with this self-perception, this fiction by which Gabe lives. The reality is that he will do violence to human life, to another's, and to his own. This is not what constitutes Gabe's deficiency of consciousness; for to do so is part and parcel of the human condition; the refusal to let go of this fiction of the self, to accept the responsibility for the violence he does is what defines Gabe's limited viewpoint. As the first stage in Roth's explosive projectile, "Gabe Wallach crashes up against the wall and collapses." The barrier of consciousness will not be breached. But I get ahead of myself.

Gabe's self-perception is a curious mixture of delusion and self-knowledge. With the letter from his mother, he comes to understand the battle that took place over him between his parents and the internal conflict it engendered. This external and internal struggle represents Roth's working out of the head and heart theme, the tension between intellect and feeling.

There had always been a struggle for me in the Wallach household. Each apparently saw my chances in life diminished if I grew in the image of the other. So I was pulled and tugged between these two somewhat terrorized people—a woman who gripped at life with taste and reason and a powerful self-control, and a man who preferred the strange forces to grip him. (p. 45)
Although Gabe is not able to "trace out exactly the influences" on his own personality, as his narrative unfolds, it becomes quite clear that his own head to heart ratio is something like nine to one. Indeed, as Gabe admits at the outset of the novel, while in the army his "one connection with the world of feeling was not the world itself but Henry James." This lack of balance will effect the chief offense Gabe can be charged with: The violation of the human heart.

After his discharge from the army, Gabe flees his father's home in New York City for the University of Iowa where he enrolls as an English graduate student. Gabe's father, Mordecai, is devastated by the loss of Anna. He has lost not only a wife, but more importantly a model—a mother. Gabe feels his refusal to function as a surrogate mother for his "drowning" father is "necessary to the preservation of my life and sanity."

The key word here is preservation—Gabe's lack of commitment to others, the ease with which he lets go of a "drowning" man, marks all of his relationships, and is a crucial component of his deficiency of consciousness.

At Iowa, he becomes involved with a truly woebegone couple: Paul and Libby Herz. Paul seems to him to be "a harried young man rapidly losing contact
with his own feelings." Gabe feels sympathy for him: "He was forever running....and forever barely making it." As many critics have noted, Paul is Gabe's polar opposite. Both are New York Jews, but here all resemblance ends. Once again, Roth indulges his unfortunate penchant for overly symbolic names. In German, Herz means heart. Paul considers himself, at least initially, a man of feeling. He is a novelist, whereas Gabe is a critic (with the accompanying resonances of these two terms). Paul is dirt poor and financially and emotionally disinherited by his equally poor parents for marrying a shikse; with his mother's inheritance, Gabe is independently wealthy. He is the one who cuts the ties with his father. Paul is a man who cannot let go of commitment; Gabe is a man who cannot let go of self-preservation.

As his opening ploy in initiating a friendship with Paul (actually "looking for somebody to complain to"), Gabe lends him a copy of The Portrait of A Lady. Forgotten is the deathbed letter from his mother which he slipped into the book a year previous. One afternoon, Libby calls Gabe; Paul is stranded on the highway with a blown piston and the two of them go out to rescue him. The incident initiates a pattern of dependence which will
culminate years later with Gabe's intervention in their adoption of a child. On the way to the stalled car, Libby's characterization of the novel inadvertently reveals that she has read the letter from Gabe's mother: "That book, as a matter of fact, is really full of people pushing and pulling at each other, and most often with absolutely clear--" Gabe immediately realizes that her next word will be "consciences." He is half outraged, half relieved that his "secret" is out, and the shared knowledge serves to bind them ambiguously together. Furthermore, Libby's characterization of The Portrait Of A Lady perfectly encapsulates the complex interactions which are the subject matter of Letting Go. Their palaver about the novel also reveals a connection between Isabel Archer and Libby. She says of Isabel, "She wants to alter what can't be altered." As Scott Donaldson has noted, this judgment applies equally as well to Libby Herz.

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3 See Robert Detweiler, "Philip Roth and the Test of Dialogic Life," in his Four Spiritual Crises in Mid-Century American Fiction (Gainesville: The University of Florida Press, 1963), pp. 25-35. Roth's concern with relationships is examined from the perspective of Martin Buber's distinction between the I-It and I-Thou relationships. According to Detweiler, the characters exist at the level of the I-It relation.

When they finally reach Paul, they find that the car is a total loss—the best he can do is to get ten dollars for it from the tow truck driver who arrives on the scene. Several days later, knowing that Paul needs transportation to the college where he teaches part-time, Gabe offers the use of his car. The offer is refused, and the characteristically selfish nature of Gabe's motivation is clear to him: "I was saddened....I had awakened that morning positively elated that I could come to his aid. Denying my help, he'd managed to deny me my elation as well."

Touched by the intensity of the Herz's relationship and problems, Gabe feels, again characteristically, "somewhat superfluous." As a result, he falls into a tenuous relationship with Marge Howells, a girl "in revolt against Kenosha." Alexander Portnoy's confession to his psychiatrist, "I don't seem to stick my dick up these girls, as much as I stick it up their backgrounds," applies not only to Alex, but to Gabe as well. The first shot in a battle which will rage throughout Roth's fiction is fired: the blond Wasp versus the dark Yid. Each is attracted mainly by the "exoticness" of the other.

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She moves in on him; unwilling to commit herself, he orders her out and flees to sanctuary in New York City and his father. Another pattern is initiated.

In New York, he manages to hold his demanding father at bay; there he ruminates on the ambiguities of "Debts and Sorrows," the title of the first chapter.

We feel a debt, I know, hearing of the other fellow's sorrows, but the question I want to raise here is, what good is the bleeding heart? What's to be done with all this pitying? Look, even my mother had it; she pitied my father. Isabel Archer pitied Osmond. I pity you, you may pity me. I don't know if it makes any of us behave better, or wiser. Terrible struggles go on in the heart, to which the heart itself will not admit, when pity is mistaken for love. (p. 46)

The second epigraph to Letting Go perhaps sheds a truer light on the position which Gabe elucidates. It is taken from Simone Weil's Gravity and Grace: "Men owe us what we imagine they will give us. We must forgive them this debt." Roth's concern in Letting Go is with the difficulties to be overcome in differentiating between those debts only "imagined" and those which are real.

Back in Iowa, he returns to an empty apartment and a brief, melodramatic farewell note from Marge. Her impact on his life is minimal, to say the least: "What she left behind, including the note, went into the garbage pail." He leaves for the Herzes, ostensibly to find out if Paul knows of her whereabouts. He
arrives to find Paul on the way out, and remains to visit the convalescing Libby. She unburdens herself to him about the unfairness of her lot; sickly (she herself recognizes "Maybe it's psychosomatic"), disowned by her parents, rejected by her in-laws (although a convert to Judaism), the victim of a "miscarriage" in Detroit. The tidal wave of self-pity breaks with the most devastating revelation of all about Paul: "I just want him to sleep with me! Oh, Christ, that's all!" In the intensity of the moment, they kiss. Gabe immediately rejects the notion that the kiss is of any significance, even though he earlier recognized her unspoken yet evident "regret... over marrying Paul and not me." He leaves, telling himself "I had no business in the lives of these people and that I would not come back, no matter who invited me." Still, there is a vestigial bleeding heart; Gabe moves swiftly to staunch the flow:

Soon I was worrying all over again as to the whereabouts of Marge Howells. I should have pulled over to Herz to ask... But what business of mine was she any more? If Marge Howells wanted to run, let her run! If my father wanted to pine, let him pine! If Libby Herz wanted to weep, let her weep. (p. 58)

He refuses responsibility for the sorrows which they endure, even those he has had a direct hand in creating. Gabe not only lets go of the debt of commitment, but he bounces from person to person like a willful pinball
whenever commitment rears its ugly head.

The second chapter of the novel, "Paul Loves Libby," narrated in the third person, takes the Herz's history from their decision to marry to the very same day that Gabe kisses Libby.

The announcement to marry brings on fear and loathing in the Herz household. Realizing their impotence (Paul "had revolted at birth and lived a separate life under his own flag from infancy on"), his parents refer him to his two uncles, Asher and Jerry.

Asher, who had "begun life a genius," is a lecherous, lewd, and cynical artist, whose once considerable talent has been perverted to painting portraits of gangsters and their molls. Although Asher prophetically asks Paul "You think happiness comes out of gall?" the gospel that he preaches is that of personal detachment and moral nihilism.

Things come and go, and you have got to be a receptacle, let them pass right through. Otherwise death will be a misery for you, boy; I'd hate to see it. What are you going to grow up to be, a canner of experience? You going to stick plugs in at either end of your life? Let it flow, let it go. Wait and accept and learn to pull the hand away. Don't clutch! (p. 83)

Years later, on a pilgrimage to New York where his father lies dying, Paul receives further philosophical amplification from his uncle. According to Asher, "Love....
is unnatural." Although he has had "every imaginable variety of cunt," relations with women are reduced to "needs." Paul must learn to cultivate the proper intellectual and emotional stance.


It is obvious what Roth is about. Asher, a miserable misanthrope, is the embodiment of what Gabe has the potential to become. He represents one end of the continuum along which all of the novel's characters are strung. The other extreme is Uncle Jerry.

Jerry, like Mordecai Wallach, is a man who prefers to be gripped by the "strange forces." Rather than argue against the marriage, he recognizes the futility of attempting to deal logically with the irrational: We're not dealing with the mind, with the practical senses anyway. This is the mysterious, spontaneous choice--the choice of the heart." The slogan over his Garden of Eden is the opposite of Asher's: "The heart... knows." Although not a repulsive character as Asher assuredly is, Jerry is definitely not to be taken as
Roth's spokesman. His characters are much too grounded in reality to fall prey to the chimerical affirmation which is the object of Roth's attack in "Writing American Fiction." As the Yiddish proverb which serves as the epigraph to Goodbye, Columbus has it, "The heart is half a prophet." After all, what is the outcome of Jerry's following of the heart? Divorce and a disastrous second marriage; he is, in his own way, as much of a "flop" as Asher.

Paul and Libby's marriage is an unmitigated disaster, in large part due to the unrealistic expectations brought to it by Paul.

His own decision was not, however, out of anything so simple, so unemotional, as obligation. If there was a sense of obligation it was to himself; he would unite to her not to make Libby a better woman, but to make himself a better man. He would place a constant demand upon his spirit, solidify his finest intentions by keeping beside him this mixture of frailty, gravity, spontaneity, and passion. He would serve another with the same sense of worthiness he served himself. Surely that was where love, where duty and passion (and lust too, to swallow Asher's argument) mingled. (p. 85)

Unfortunately, the amalgam of love, duty, passion, and lust soon breaks down: Only duty will remain.

The remainder of the second chapter takes up their misfortunes in Detroit where they go to make money so that Paul can afford graduate school. In one of the book's more brutal and nightmarish sequences, Libby's
abortion becomes inexplicably intertwined with a subplot centering on two decrepit, bitter men, Levy and Korngold. Another sorry chapter in Roth's ongoing saga of familial alienation, Korngold, whose sole worldly possession is some "unmoved" underwear, enlists the "lawyer" Levy to write a threatening letter to his son for financial support. When Korngold perceives that Levy is out to cheat him, Levy uses his knowledge of Libby's abortion to blackmail Paul into abetting his schemes. The upshot of the entire bloody mess is that a rift is initiated between the newlyweds, which, by the time Gabe Wallach enters onto the scene, has widened into a chasm.

The last two pages of the chapter are the journal entry made by Paul while Gabe is kissing Libby. It reveals not only that Paul has had a sexual encounter with the devastated Marge Howells (an experience he judges "more ruinous than what happened in Detroit"), but his true motivation in staying away.

Give them what time it takes. He'll crawl into our bed and free poor Libby. Am I crazy? No, let her go, let Wallach be the answer, this soft rich boyish boy, not-a-care-in-the-world boy.... Let them kiss in our bed, let him devour her, caress her, absolutely drive a wedge right through her loyalty to me. Take her loyalty away! (p. 153)

When he returns and hears Libby's confession, Paul repents. The concluding words of his journal entry also close out
the second chapter: "Start over. Try!"

In spite of the fact that he has sworn to have nothing to do with the Herzes again, three years later when an opening occurs at the University of Chicago where he teaches, Gabe is instrumental in reuniting the three of them. In large part out of the desire to create a bulwark against his feelings for Libby, Gabe becomes involved with an attractive divorcée, Martha Reganheart. One of the few simpatico women in all of Roth's fiction, Martha is honest, engaging, and attractive. She also is mired in as unrelenting a reality as the Herzes, but eschews Libby's whining and Paul's predilection for mental masturbation. The survivor of a disastrous marriage (what else!) to an up and coming abstract artist, she struggles with her two children to make ends meet as a waitress in a Hyde Park greasy spoon. Although avidly pursued by Sid Jaffe, a generous and well-meaning lawyer, Martha refuses to marry "once more for wrong and expedient reasons." Marriage to "dependable" Sid may make eminent sense, but, as her name implies, Martha Reganheart is a woman whose heart reigns, not head: "No, there was only one bag to put your marbles in, one basket for your eggs, and that was love." The man she comes to love is Gabe Wallach.
Their tenous relationship reaches a turning point when he takes ill and stays at her apartment for several days. Although sinfully comfortable there, he is characteristically chary of being sucked into her "predicament."

Her life was complicated in ways that would not uncomplicate themselves by a mere lapse of time. There were these two small children to consider; loving her, must I not love them too? Was I up to it? Did I really want to? (p. 277)

In spite of the fact that Martha reassures him, "I don't need a husband, sweetheart--just a lover, Gabe, just someone to plain and simple love me," Gabe initiates an argument so that he can cover his panicked retreat from the commitment she represents. At a Christmas party (the holiday intensifying his feeling of being a "superfluous man"), Gabe comes upon a new Libby: witty, attractive, and the center of attention for all the men. Unable to handle the emotions evoked, he first callously trifles with the affections of a pathetic spinster, dumps her, and returns to Martha.

The relationship fares no better upon his return. They constantly quarrel over money, which becomes a symbol of his lack of commitment. By paying his own way (while retaining his old apartment), Gabe attempts to articulate the limits of their intimacy. The tensions
which develop finally explode at an ill-advised dinner party with Paul and Libby. Everything becomes a source of contention between them, even the fact that he serves her cognac after dinner. On the other front, Libby and Paul's perceived reaction is not quite what Gabe imagined it would be. Even the magnificent roast he supplies elicits ambivalent and familiar emotions in Gabe.

It was as though a particularly gross display of wealth had been flaunted; we were about to dine on some mysterious incarnation of rubies and gold. Then I opened a bottle of Gevrey Chambertin (1951) and with the classy thhhppp of the cork, we were all reminded again of the superfluity that characterized my particular sojourn on this earth. In short, I felt that Paul and Libby— in different degrees, for different reasons— resented me for Martha's gaudy voluptuousness and for the meal as well. (p. 310)

Things go from bad to worse, and the night's entertainment concludes with shouted obsenities and the Herz's abrupt exit. The argument which ensues ends with Martha's frustrated confession and ultimatum: "I want you to marry me or give me up. I'm too old to screw around like this." Of course, Gabe is able to do neither. A wary truce sets in, and the novel's focus briefly shifts back to Paul and Libby.

Since Libby is incapable of bearing children due to "lousy kidneys," the adoption of a child is seen as a panacea for their failing marriage. A surprise visit
from the representative of a Jewish adoption agency when Paul is away degenerates into a total fiasco. Insecure in all of her responses to his queries, Libby finally flounders in the shoals of religion. Forced to admit that they go to no synagogue, she first puts words in the caseworker's mouth and then commits the ultimate faux pas before she forces him out the door: "Oh no, you're perfectly right, you're a hundred percent right, religion is very important to a child. But....but my husband and I don't believe a God damn bit of it." Needless to say, any chance for adoption through the agency has disappeared.

That afternoon, she goes to see a psychiatrist, partly in order to "somehow get back to what she was"-- a "delightful, bubbly girl." What she wants, of course, is a return to the pre-Paul Libby, an impossibility. In her interview with Dr. Lumin (once again, the overly apt surname!), Libby illuminates the twin demons which torment her: Paul makes love to her but once a month and her love-hate relationship with Gabe. When Lumin attempts to refer her to the Institute for Psychoanalysis (Libby cannot afford his steep rates), she is insistent: "I want you!" When he remonstrates, "Of course, one can't always have everything one wants," Libby's classic bit of self-deception is laid bare: "I don't want everything!
I just want something!" Libby's essential problem is that she indeed does want everything.


Perhaps there was one final way out of all this mess that was not psychoanalysis, or money in the bank, or carnality, or self-pity, or madness: Religion. Not all that Christ and Mary hocus-pocus, not even a belief in God necessarily—though who could tell, maybe God Himself would come in time. But first something basic and sustaining, something to make them truly ready for, deserving of, a baby; something warm, sacred, worth while: traditions and ceremonies, holy days and holidays and customs.... (pp. 354-55)

Unable to achieve the reality, she at least will have the outward trappings of religious belief; Libby must be satisfied with "something."

Paul returns home that evening with Gabe and the shocking news that Gabe has intervened in their search for a child. He proposes a private adoption. After typical unpleasanties are exchanged (Libby to Gabe: "All the world loves Gabe, but who does Gabe love?), it is decided he will continue as middleman in setting up the adoption. Unbeknownst to Paul and Libby, the pregnant girl is Theresa Haug, a co-worker of Martha's. Gabe's "pinball" nature is clearly in evidence in the following chain of people he bounces through.
For Martha (not myself) I had spoken to Paul Herz; for Paul I had spoken to Libby; for Libby I would speak to Theresa Haug. What other way could it have been? (p. 362)

Especially for a man who has always been "Very Decent to People!"

Martha's initial suggestion to Gabe that the Herz's adopt Theresa's unborn child is met with vehement rejection. "Fuck them--the two of them! I've had enough! Too damn much!" It all boils down to a very basic question for Gabe: "How much from me?" Gabe fights to let go of any claims on him, but to no avail. He "slides back" into the mess which is the Herz's marriage.

By now it should be apparent that nothing is simple and clearcut in the world these people inhabit. The negotiations with the ignorant, mistrustful hillbilly Theresa, are grim and uncomfortable for both parties. Even the Lake Shore Drive restaurant Gabe takes her to contributes to the charged atmosphere between the two of them. He realizes the error in bringing her to such an establishment, and, more importantly, the selfish motivation in doing so: "The only person I had set out to spare was the same old person one usually sets out to spare, no matter how complex the strategy." Admittedly, the choice of the restaurant is no hanging matter; nonethe-
less, as Gabe intuited, it is indicative of an approach to life which hardly squares with his professed vow to "do no violence to human life, not to another's and not to my own." It seems the others always get lost in the shuffle of looking out for number one. After concluding the negotiations, Gabe drives Theresa back to her dismal flat in equally dismal Gary, Indiana. He is horrified by his physical response to her ("my blood responded.... as though she were a woman"), but the true horror is that he fails to see her as a human being.

Out of a mixture of disgust and self-protection (this time against his own flesh), he flees to Martha and proposes marriage with as little grace as is humanly possible. Martha, who is no dummy, quickly rejects the proposal and drops a bombshell of her own. Her ex-husband, about to marry a heiress, is in town and wants to take custody of the children. She drops a second bombshell: "I want him to take the kids." Martha is ready to let go of them for many reasons. Paramount is the implicit choice of Gabe over the children. Again rejecting a half-hearted proposal, she implores him to make love to her "with nobody's neuroses blooming down the hall--nobody, nothing but our two selves."

The freedom she chooses will have its price. After a few months of living together without the children, a
sickening realization is forced on Gabe: "What I feel Martha feeling toward me, what I know myself to be feeling toward her, is hate."

Martha Reganheart is not the only one to experience a critical turning point. Paul Herz receives a telegram informing him his father is dying. On the train ride out to New York City, he re-examines first principles and the facts of his life.

Between the pretension and the fact, what's invented and what's given, stands one's own tortured soul. Paul Herz had been pretending all these awful years that he was of another order of men. It occurred to him now....that, no, he was not a man of feeling; it occurred to him that if he was anything at all it was a man of duty. And that when his two selves had become confused--one self, one invention--when he had felt it his duty to be feeling, that then his heart had been a stone, and his will, instead of turning out toward action, had remained a presence in his body, a concrete setting for the rock of his heart. (p. 408)

Paul finally comprehends his fiction of himself for what it is: A dangerous sham which keeps him from realizing his true capabilities. Unlike Gabe Wallach, Paul is able to let go of this fiction of the self, a fiction which necessarily limits consciousness.

Paul's prescription for spiritual and mental health is to start from scratch: "Start making a life not on the basis of what he dreamed he was, or thought he was supposed to be, or what literature, philosophy, friends, enemies, wife, parents told him he must be,
but simply in terms of his own possibilities." In his misery and self-loathing, he understandably searches for a scapegoat—first his father, then his wife. The measure of his growth is that he comes to accept the responsibility for his own life. Although the desire is there, he finally realizes he cannot "divest himself of himself." Honest self-acceptance is the first stage in painful reconciliation with others. At his father's grave, Paul undergoes not only a reconciliation with the dead man and his mother, but a spiritual conversion of sorts.

For his truth was revealed to him, his final premise melted away. What he had taken for order was chaos. Justice was illusion. Abraham and Isaac were one. His eyes opened, and in the midst of those faces...he felt no humiliation and no shame. Their eyes no longer overpowered him. He felt himself under a wider beam. (p. 452)

His spiritual conversion encompasses nothing as simple as a return to the faith of his fathers. Back in Chicago, he makes a daily pilgrimage to the synagogue, purportedly to say Kaddish. Paul reveals to Libby that in actuality he does not pray, but mourn. In response to her exasperated, "Well--but don't mourn: Fix things up!" he replies, "Certain things I have to accept." What he accepts are the consequences of the choices he has made, consequences which are to be suffered and not
predicted. In short, he has exchanged a limited viewpoint for a higher level of consciousness. His victory of consciousness is the novel's touchstone against which Gabe Wallach's failure can be measured.

Just as Paul finally is forced to come to grips with his lack of integration, Gabe comes to realize "He must try to bring together his actions and his appetites." The unsuccessful attempt is instigated after Martha terminates their relationship in the wake of the accidental death of her son at the hands of his sister. Gabe, asserting "his sense of his own innocence," refuses to accept any responsibility for the loss of the child; in the course of rationalizing his accountability, Gabe embarks on a classic bit of self-deception: "He had only to distinguish for himself between the impact one had on the lives of others and the sheer momentum of fate--chance, luck, accident, for which no man who had merely crossed another's path could be held accountable."

Ironically, the articulate instructor in the vagaries of college composition easily falls prey to the blandishments of the "either-or" logical fallacy. Gabe's over-simplification denies the ambiguity and irony which makes up the human condition. Furthermore, whenever reality takes a nasty turn, the latter option is an
ever-accessible refuge from any mortification of the soul.

Although intellectually and morally obtuse in this over-simplification, Gabe retains some clarity of vision into his own motivation.

The same impulse that had led him to want to tidy up certain messy lives had led him also to turn his back upon others that threatened to engulf his own. He had finally come to recognize in himself a certain dread of the savageness of life. Tenderness, grace, affection: they struck him now as toys with which he had set about to hammer away at mountains. (p. 529)

Here is the barrier of consciousness against which Gabe crashes. The gut-wrenching force of this epiphany is too much for him to handle. Immediately afterward the rationalizations begin: "He had tried to be reasonable with everyone--but the demands made upon him had been made by unreasonable people." Gabe cannot let go of, and retreats to, his favorite fiction of the self, "that I would do no violence to human life, not to another's and not to my own." All of his actions in the remainder of the novel are undertaken in the defense of this delusion. Gabe will become a "Mad-Crusader," a champion of his own "innocence."

After the initial difficulties with Theresa Haug are resolved, the transfer of the child from the unfortunate woman to the Herzes is handled expeditiously by Gabe and Sid Jaffe. Although Rachel's adoption seems
to be proceeding smoothly, the novel's denouement is structured on the resolution of an unforeseen complication. In a letter to Sid Jaffe, Theresa reveals her true identity: Mrs. Harry Bigoness. More unsettling is the news that her husband refuses to allow her to "get mixed-up again" in the legal proceedings for the adoption. Gabe, "who did not feel he was deceiving himself by continuing to believe he was not an irresponsible man," decides to intervene once again. Without informing anyone, he pays a surprise visit to the Bigoness household. He does so having just learned from Libby that Martha has decided to marry Jaffe after all. While waiting to speak to Bigoness he had a full-blown daydream: He saw himself being reconciled with Martha. He dreamed of stealing her back from Jaffe. He saw himself on the brink of many changes. He was not sorry now that he had come, nor that his trip was a secret from the Herzes. It gave him strength, knowing that he did not want or expect their gratitude. (p. 554)

It is clear he wants to win back Martha out of wounded vanity and self-righteousness; furthermore, the intervention is to be proof positive that he is not an "irresponsible man." The unemployed Bigoness, out of ignorance and a hatred of courts of law and Jews, refuses to sign the consent form for the adoption until Gabe offers him forth five dollars for his trouble. With the matter seemingly put to rest, Gabe returns to Chicago
and Martha.

He has not seen her for months. Unable to charm Martha into capitulating and enflamed by her rejection, he attempts to rape her. A good clout to the side of the head stops him in his tracks, as do her scornful words: "I've had a penchant for jelly filled men, but I've gotten over it." Stung by her accusation that he is getting through life "unscathed," he "viciously" taunts her about her conscience. She will have no part of his manipulations.

Don't ever try to get me in bed again, you! And don't worry about my conscience. Worry about your own. I'm not playing it safe. I'm using some sense for once. I've let go and let go and let go--I've let go plenty. I've had a wilder history than you, by a long shot. I've got a right to hang on now. Don't ever get in bed with me again. Ever!

(pp. 575-76)

Martha has let go--and always in response to claims of the heart; she refuses to be "self-destructive" any longer. She has learned that there is much more to love than a flushing of the hormones. In short, she has learned the wisdom of the Yiddish proverb: "The heart is half a prophet."

Two days later, Gabe phones Bigoness in order to make sure he fully understands the instructions for the signing of the adoption papers. Bigoness, genuinely in need with three squalling and sickly children, decides to up the ante. The deal is off. Gabe races out to Gary
for another session of frenzied haggling and finally dishes out an additional hundred dollars. Back home in Chicago, he receives a call from Libby. She asks him to babysit for them Christmas Eve, the night they will pick up Paul's mother for her first visit with the new family. The scene is set for the novel's climactic paroxysm.

Christmas eve arrives. Gabe once again calls Gary to make sure that all is in readiness. The upshot of a series of three frenetic phone calls is a new ultimatum from Bigoness: Five hundred dollars cash to cover his son's hospitalization. Gabe can take no more. Realizing he must somehow make Rachel's existence a reality for Bigoness, he bundles her up and sets out for Gary. Before he drives off, he desperately embraces the little girl.

And it was not out of pity or love that he found himself clutching her; the mystery of her circumstances was not what was weighing him down. He clutched her to himself as though she were himself. It was as though the child embraced the man, not the man the child. He ground his teeth, locked his arms: If only he could tell which he was being, prudent, imprudent, brave, sentimental.... A bleeding heart, a cold heart, a soft heart, a hard, a cautious....which? But there was no comfort for him in tears, or in reason. He had passed beyond what he had taken for the normal round of life, beyond what had been kept normal by fortune and by strategy. Tears would only roll off the shell of him. And every reason had its mate. Whichever way he turned, there was a kind of horror. (p. 599)
The "Mad Crusader's" final horror awaits him in Gary.

In a nightmarish three-cornered confrontation (Gabe against Harry, Gabe against Theresa, Harry against Theresa), Gabe literally crumples up and collapses to the floor: "His forehead was touching the rug, his arms were over his ears. He was not moving." Led to the phone, he can barely dial Paul's number. Theresa is forced to take over; after ascertaining Paul is "the man who's got a little baby," she pleads, "Come get it then!...We don't want it!" The melodrama is finally over.

The novel opens and closes with a letter; the latter is written the following November and is from Gabe, now an expatriate in London, to Libby. Unlike his mother's letter, Gabe's is more apologia than apology. In it, he rejects Libby's implicit "forgiveness" (symbolized to him by the formal invitation to Rachel's first birthday celebration). More significantly, the letter reveals just how tenaciously he clings to his fiction of the self.

I can't bring myself yet to ask forgiveness for that night. If you've lived for a long while as an indecisive man, you can't simply forget, obliterate, bury, your one decisive moment. I can't--in the name of the future, perhaps--accept forgiveness for my time of strength....You see, I thought at the time that I was sacrificing myself. (pp. 627-28)

Still proclaiming his innocence, still Very Decent to
People, Gabe has learned nothing. The letter's closing words not only reinforce this sad judgment, but also bring the novel to its melancholy conclusion.

It is only kind of you, Libby, to feel that I would want to know that I am off the hook. But I'm not, I can't be, I don't even want to be--not until I make some sense of the larger hook I'm on. (p. 628)

The larger hook is his own deficiency of consciousness, the elements of which have been prefigured in the characters of Werner Samuelson and Ozzie Freedman.

There are two significant similarities between Gabe and his precursor, Werner. Buth are unable to reconcile a basic inner contradiction: In Gabe's case, it stems from the discrepancy between his self-perception and the actuality of his behavior. The resultant ambiguity is far too much for him to bear. He therefore runs, just as Werner does at the end of "The Contest for Aaron Gold." Both thereby attempt not only to avoid the consequences of their choices, but the pain of awareness as well.

Furthermore, Gabe's arrogant manipulation of others certainly mirrors Ozzie's artful plucking of his spectators' emotional strings while on the synagogue roof. Both do what they do out of ostensible pure motives. Nonetheless, with his lack of emotional commitment to the people in his life, Gabe regularly is
guilty of a clinical violation of the human heart. It is precisely this which Gabe's father finds particularly galling about his son.

'People's lives, you don't go fooling in them. You let people be themselves--you can ruin a life like that. Your own mother, on her last night, that's what she talked about. That's what she regretted above anything else. Don't interfere--'

(p. 503)

This all adds up to a refusal on Gabe's part to live the human condition as it is given. The measure of his deficiency of consciousness is that he never quite accepts the sad truth that one cannot "administrate anguish" out of the struggles of living. Unlike Paul, his ironic counterpart, Gabe is unable to finally "accept the absurdities of life without clutching for final answers." 

Letting Go was published in 1962, three years after the extraordinary success of Goodbye, Columbus. In the interval between the two works, Roth was awarded the Jewish Book Council's Daroff Award, the Paris Review's Aga Khan Award, a National Institute of Arts and Letters Grant, a Guggenheim Fellowship, A Ford Foundation Grant, and, of course, the 1960 National Book Award for Goodbye, Columbus. As Arthur Mizener noted in his review of Letting Go, the expectations raised by

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6 McDaniel, P. 87.
this formidable catalogue of achievement was "not altogether an enviable lot for a man writing his first novel." 7 Indeed, as it turned out, initial reviews for Letting Go could not have been very gratifying for Roth. Perhaps accustomed to the lighter tone and more incisive quality of the short stories, many critics were put off by Roth's audacity in producing this six hundred plus page opus of pain. Out of this spirit comes Norman Mailer's assessment that Letting Go is "a collection of intricately inter-connected short stories" 8 which fails as a novel. Of course, Mailer being Mailer, this judgment must be understood in light of his professed desire to be the sole ravisher of the Bitch Goddess of Literary Success—merely "holding onto a buttock of the lady" 9 is definitely not sufficient stature for a writer who considers himself "the champ."

Similarly suspect are the evaluations of those reviewers with ideological and critical axes to grind. For example, how seriously is one to take Alan Cheuse's charge that "this book is a failure because the narrator

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8 Norman Mailer, "Some Children of the Goddess, Esquire, 60 (July 1963), 68.

9 Ibid., p. 64.
is a lover of capitalism"? Other critics (Helen Weinberg for one) have placed the novel on a Procrustean Bed of personal literary theory, stretched it out of shape, and found it wanting. Weinberg erroneously considers Letting Go imitative of the "activist" novels of Bellow, in spite of the clear distinction in intention and achievement between the two novelists.

The confusion which the novel engendered is evidenced in the contradictory tack taken by the following critics. On one hand, Baruch Hochman and Mizener judged the novel a failure because of Gabe's obsession with his personal life, while on the other, Irving Feldman objected that Gabe "is not a character, but a position."

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12 Baruch Hochman, "Child and Man in Philip Roth," Midstream, 13 (December 1967), 72. Hochman condemns the characters' perpetual "sloshing in the agitated (if shallow) waters of selfhood."

This conclusion is predicated on the underlying assumption that "the broad subject of Letting Go, which begins as the end of the Korean War and concludes with the Recession of 1957, is the hopelessness of the Eisenhower era."¹⁴ Like blind men latching onto different parts of an elephant, Hochman, Mizener, and Feldman have hooked onto but one aspect of the novel at the expense of the totality. In order to reconcile these opposites, Roth's injunction from "Writing American Fiction" must be recalled: "There is the world, and there is also the self."¹⁵ Both together are quite properly his concern in Letting Go.

The rather lengthy analysis developed in this chapter should obviate the need to demonstrate Gabe's viability as a character. However, what about the counter charge? Is enough of the "world," enough of American reality, really present in this novel? Indeed it is. Theodore Solotaroff (in some ways the model for Paul Herz) precisely delineates the interrelation of Roth's concern with world and self in a personal reminiscence of their days at the University of Chicago.

¹⁵ Refer to text above, Chapter II, p. 79.
What Roth was mainly drawing on, I felt, was a certain depressiveness that had been in the air; the result of those long Chicago winters, the longuers of graduate school and composition courses, the financial strains, the disillusionment with the University (this was the period in which the Hutchins experiments were being dismantled and the administration was waging a reign of respectability in all areas), and the concomitant dullness of the society-at-large, which had reached the bottom of the Eisenhower era. But mostly this depressiveness was caused by the self-inflicted burdens of private life, which in this age of conformity often seemed to serve for politics, art, and the other avenues of youthful experience and experiment.\textsuperscript{16}

Roth depicts not only the "dullness" of the era for the bourgeoisie, but its more pernicious effects on the working class in the person of the frustrated, fearful, yet proud, Harry Bigoness.

But I'll tell you buddy....people have been thinking they're going to tell me what to do all my life. Now you're working, now you ain't; now you're making a buck eighty an hour, now you're making a buck eighty-five; now you're a man, now you're nothing but a nursemaid....I didn't make this recession--understand? - and don't think you're going to shove anybody around because of it. (p. 582)

Another key instance of the world intruding and determining the perceptions and options of the private self is the nightmarish abortion episode in Detroit, considered by Solotaroff the "best writing in the book."\textsuperscript{17} Roth eschews any moralizing on the issue; what is presented


\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p. 314.
is the rock hard reality of the then illicit activity. In short, the first epigraph to the novel, taken from Thomas Mann's *A Sketch of My Life*, emphatically underlines Roth's fidelity to his prescription for artistic integrity: "All actuality is deadly earnest; and it is morality itself that, one with life, forbids us to be true to the guileless unrealism of our youth." Roth certainly doses out enough "actuality" in this novel to give the lie to the complaint that it is merely an extended excursion into the depths of the self.

This is not to say that the critics simply lambasted the novel. Sanford Pinsker termed it "A sprawling, largely unresolved affair that strained for significance on one hand and dazzled with small brilliances on the other." Arthur Mizener articulated the most dazzling brilliance: "It is rich in those minor figures at the edge of fantasy that constantly awe and astonish us and are almost convincing." In the two most extensive and appreciative studies of the novel to appear so far, Scott Donaldson found *Letting Go* "a landmark in the genre of psychological realism" and

18Pinsker, p. 28.
19Mizener, p. 1.
20Donaldson, p. 35.
Stanley Cooperman judged it to be Roth's finest and most complex work.21

Nonetheless, serious critical difficulties remain. Complaints about the novel's interminable quality are valid, not because of its length per se, but because of its scope. Roth simply attempts to incorporate far too much material. Most critics correctly view the comparisons and contrasts evoked in the Gabe-Paul relationship as the novel's principle of cohesion. Unfortunately, Roth makes a major tactical error in not structuring the novel more consistently on this relationship. It is as though he fell in love with entire sections which a more sober eye would have cut. Examples abound. Although Roth deftly wields a devastating rapier in his satire on some of the more obnoxious beauties and excellencies of academia (especially in his "expose" of high tension departmental parties and those ineffable sessions set up to insure grade conformity), the question is to what effect? In the section of the novel titled "Children and Men," both the chapters on the death of

Markie and the one focusing on the relationship between Mordecai and the ever-inebriated Fay could be exised without inflicting any permanent damage. Finally, what is one to make of the entirely gratuitous reappearance of Marge Howells in a restaurant at the end of the novel?

Although troubling, these difficulties pale in significance to the novel's most serious flaw: in the penultimate chapter, "The Mad Crusader," Gabe's point of view shifts from the first to the third person. Although he overstates the case, Richard A. Rand sheds light on some of the consequences of this shift.

Wallach is no longer himself. He becomes just another Paul Herz, a man thrown upon the brutality of the world around him; he has been deprived, by a device of narrative strategy, of the chance to fulfil his own problematic existence....as an act of fiction it is fundamentally specious; if a shift in Wallach's personality is to have any value as a literary experience, it has to take place in the first, and not the third person, since it is in the first person that we have come to know him. Roth, by a clever handling of his narrative technique, has announced a total change in his figure without actually working it out.22

Gabe's change is neither total nor does he throw himself into life; his mad crusade is undertaken to prove his innocence, an innocence heretofore smugly maintained in

a posture of passivity. But why shift to the third person when the same effect could easily be achieved in the first person? Roth does not even exploit the ambiguity which arises when there is obviously a discrepancy between what the omniscient narrator knows and what the protagonist knows. Throughout the chapter, Roth repeatedly utilizes formulations such as "Gabe knew" or "Gabe realized." No; the failure which Rand senses is a failure of nerve and technique. At this stage in his career, Roth had successfully and plausibly handled (albeit in the third person) the complete dissolution of personality in the characters of Eli Peck and Paul Herz. Several passages taken from Gabe's ultimate breakdown amply illustrate the difficulty in dealing with such a situation in a first person narration.

Simply imagine Gabe relating the following:

A few minutes earlier there had been all that screaming in the living room; now no one was speaking. Vic was standing, and Mr. Wallace was on the floor. On his knees. His forehead was touching the rug, his arms were over his ears. He was not moving....Mr. Wallace was rising off the floor. He did not take his arms from his ears. He did not look up. He did not smile--she thought he might; that it might be a joke he had pulled to make them all quiet down. (p. 625)

The effect is ludicrous. At this crucial turning point, Roth falls back on the ignorant Theresa as his center of consciousness. One measure of Roth's technical growth
is the relative ease with which he will handle this tricky problem a few years down the literary road in the infamous Portnoy's Complaint.
CHAPTER IV

STAGE TWO: PORTNOY'S COMPLAINT

Unable to "make some sense of the larger hook" he is on, a traumatized Gabe Wallach flees to uncertain sanctuary in Europe. In the wake of a disastrous vacation to the continent and Israel, an even more traumatized native, Alexander Portnoy, returns home.¹ Within one week of his arrival in New York City, Portnoy takes the first important step in the attempt to comprehend his own "hook." He initiates analysis under the care of a psychiatrist, Dr. Spielvogel,² who remains a silent recipient of the unsavory detritus of Portnoy's life until he delivers the novel's concluding "punch line": "So....Now vee may perhaps to begin. Yes?"


²As always, Roth has a great deal of fun with names. Bernice W. Kliman points out "Spiel means play, sport, plaything, performance, and, of course, Portnoy does play with his psychiatrist in that he does not allow him to say one word." In "Names in Portnoy's Complaint," Critique, 14, (No. 3, 1972), 19, Vogel means bird in German; the compound is rich in humorous implications.
That Portnoy engages in the psychoanalytic process is significant in and of itself; unlike those protagonists who attempt to escape the pain of awareness, he at least evidences some willingness to confront his own deficiency of consciousness. His more or less chronological free associations are spewed forth in a series of six monologues. In turn comic, grotesque, evocative, disgusting, pathetic (and every permutation thereof), the free associations are generated in the same hope with which Portnoy reads Freud: The search for "the sentence, the phrase, the word that will liberate me from what I understand are called my fantasies and fixations." This is not to say that his motivation is entirely pure, for much of his effort is simply a selfserving attempt to get himself off the hook of responsibility and to put others, namely his parents, on it. The failure of this attempt, coupled with the exhaustion of myriad other rationalizations, is critical in making Alexander Portnoy the second stage in Roth's explosive projectile. As Roth puts it, "Portnoy proceeds on through the fractured mortar, only to become lodged there, half in, half out." The decisive breakthrough of the barrier of true consciousness of the "open decision" will not be achieved by this hysterical analysand.
Early on in the course of his convoluted ramblings, Portnoy enunciates his heart's desire: peace and simplicity. Playing center field in his playground softball league becomes an objective correlative for Portnoy's fondly remembered and devoutly longed for emotional state.

...yes, every little detail so thoroughly studied and mastered, that it is simply beyond the realm of possibility for any situation to arise in which I do not know how to move, or where to move, or what to say or leave unsaid....And it's true, is it not?--incredible, but apparently true--there are people who feel in life the ease, the self-assurance, the simple and essential affiliation with what is going on, that I used to feel as the center fielder for the Seabees? Because it wasn't, you see, that one was the best center fielder imaginable, only that one knew exactly, and down to the smallest particular, how a center fielder should conduct himself. And there are people like that walking the streets of the U.S. of A.? I ask you, why can't I be one! Why can't I exist now as I existed for the Seabees out there in center field! Oh, to be a center fielder, a center fielder--and nothing more! (pp. 79-80)

The irony which undercuts his rather bucolic remembrance is the realization that even there he was merely a master of style and not substance. A totally inept hitter,

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Portnoy never could make his high school baseball team. Thus, even the ideal is grimly rooted in a disappointing reality for him.

Portnoy is man so deeply and bitterly divided against himself that his aberration, Portnoy's Complaint, merits a mock psychiatric textbook definition. 4

A disorder in which strongly-felt ethical and altruistic impulses are perpetually warring with extreme sexual longings, often of a perverse nature. Spielvogel says: 'Acts of exhibitionism, voyeurism, fetishism, auto-eroticism and oral coitus are plentiful; as a consequence of the patient's "morality," however, neither fantasy nor act issues in genuine sexual gratification, but rather in overriding feelings of shame and the dread of retribution, particularly in the form of castration.' (Spielvogel, O. 'The Puzzled Penis," Internationale Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyses, Vol. XXIV p. 909.) It is believed by Spielvogel that many of the symptoms can be traced to the bonds obtaining in the mother-child relationship.

Ambivalence is the banner under which he marches--two steps forward, two steps back, five steps forward, five steps back. Whereas Gabe Wallach's ambivalence always seems primarily the product of intellectual detachment, Portnoy's is agonizingly visceral. Nothing is simple for him: desire and repulsion, love and hate, pride and

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4 Robert Dupree draws an interesting series of parallels between Portnoy and Tristram Shandy on the basis of the definition's dilemma: "Tristram and Portnoy both spend their lives attempting to understand themselves"--the two novels are the result. In "And the Mom Roth Outgrabe or, What Hath Got Roth?" Arlington Quarterly, 2 (Autumn 1970), 181.
shame, innocence and guilt—the contraries precariously coexist both in his self-perception and relations with others. At one level, the analysis therefore proceeds as an attempt on his part to trace the sources and behavioral effects of his troublesome ambivalence, and is a positive step in the growth of a decidedly limited viewpoint. As Portnoy testifies (and Spielvogel's definition indicates), the primary source of Portnoy's psychological and emotional instability is his mother, Sophie. 5

For her obsessed son, Sophie is indeed "The Most Unforgettable Character I've Met," the title of the first chapter. The novel's opening sentence precisely fixes her impact on the young Alex: "She was so deeply

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5An army of critics have traced Sophie's literary antecedent to Mrs. Morel in D.H. Lawrence's Sons and Lovers. For example, Harold Fisch characterizes Mrs. Morel as the "first fully articulated 'yidishe mama' we meet in modern literature." In "Fathers, Mothers, Sons and Lovers: Jewish and Gentile Patterns in Literature," Midstream, 18, (March 1972), 44. See also: Dupree, p. 179, and Pinsker, p. 61. Alan Warren Friedman finds an ur-Sophie in Volumnia, the domineering mother of Coriolanus—a classic example of the excesses such a search often results in. In "The Jew's Complaint in Recent American Fiction: Beyond Exodus and Still in the Wilderness," The Southern Review, 8 (1972), 54. On firmer ground is Melvin J. Friedman, who argues: "There are indeed other concerns in the novel, but somehow they have a way of bringing Alexander Portnoy back to his mother." In "Jewish Mothers and Sons: The Expense of Chutzpah," Contemporary American-Jewish Literature, ed., Irving Malin, (Indiana University Press: Bloomington and London, 1972), p. 171.
imbedded in my consciousness that for the first year of school I seem to have believed that each of my teachers was my mother in disguise." As we come to know Portnoy, it becomes clear that his mother actually is always with him in the psychic havoc she wreaks. A series of traumatic episodes, all sexually grounded, establish her as a "perpetually illuminated" icon in his "Modern Museum of Gripes and Grievances." This is the stuff of which Portnoy's nightmares are made: Still a baby, she teaches him to urinate standing up by tickling the underside of his penis, all the while cajoling, "Make a nice sis, bubala, make a nice little sissy for Mommy"; at the age of four or five, the sight of two drops of her menstrual blood on the kitchen floor; at the same age, the spectacle of his mother half-naked, rolling up her stockings, and asking, "Who does Mommy love more than anything in the whole wide world?"; at the age of six or seven, she threatens him with a knife when he will not eat (the origin of his castration fantasy); at the age of eleven, when he asks for a swimsuit with a supporter in it (in front of his father and uncle yet!), she laughingly queries, "For your little thing?"; finally, at the same age, she once again embarrasses him by sending him rather than his sister to the store for sanitary napkins.
The first three episodes illustrate what Portnoy perceives to be the origins of his unresolved sexual desire for his mother. Recalled halfway through his litany of anguish, the first initially seems the most important to him: "Listen, this may well be the piece of information we've been waiting for, the key to what determined my character, what causes me to be living in this predicament, torn by desires that are repugnant to my conscience, and a conscience repugnant to my desires." However, after explaining his mother's methodology to Spielvogel, Portnoy equivocates.

I guess she thinks that's how to get stuff to come out of the front end of that thing, and let me tell you, the lady is right... in actuality what I am standing there making with her hand on my prong is in all probability my future! Imagine! The ludicrousness! A man's character is being forged, a destiny is being shaped....oh, maybe not.... (p. 149)

Portnoy's uncertainty at this point is quite significant in that it foreshadows the eventual failure of his attempt to find her responsible for the sad shape he is in.

Unfortunately, Sophie's legacy to her son is not limited to the sexual confusion she engenders. Bizarre and contradictory aspects of her personality appear to be grafted in toto onto her tender sprig. Alex is raised on a steady diet of books from her series, *You Know Me, I'll Try Anything Once*. The most famous is a
cautionary lobster tale, wherein Sophie transgresses against the dietary laws; divine retribution is swift as she vomits "so hard" that her fingers nearly become "paralyzed." Although many such dangers are bravely fronted ("She actually seems to think of herself as a woman at the very frontiers of experience, some doomed dazzling combination of Marie Curie, Anna Karenina, and Amelia Earhart"), there are chances that no man dare take: Hamburgers and french fries at the local hangout are the first step to colitis and the final tragic end: "Wearing a plastic bag to do your business in!"; a sip from the playground drinking fountain inevitably results in, what else? - polio! Every practical tale she teaches has the same moral: Behave correctly or face damnation or worse. The effect on Portnoy is predictable. Sophie does an excellent job of instilling her own "fearful sense of life" in her son.

The guilt, the fears--the terror bred into my bones! What in their world was not charged with danger, dripping with germs, fraught with peril? Oh, where was the gusto, where was the boldness and courage? (p. 37)

At the same time, Sophie's sense of herself as being heroically larger than life is reflected in Alex's self-perception: He is no mere masturbator, but "the Raskolnikov of jerking off." Furthermore, along with the dread of instant retribution for any transgression,
the ubiquitous Sophie instills an incredible fear of exposure in Portnoy, but more about this phobia later!

Curiously enough, in spite of all this kvetching, a portrait emerges of a woman who is honest, devoted, hardworking, loving, and in many ways genuinely admirable. The depth of Portnoy's true feeling for her is unmistakable, especially in his recollection of the panic and profound dismay he felt as an adolescent when faced with the possibility of losing her to cancer.

And then there is that word we wait and wait and wait to hear, the word whose utterance will restore to our family what now seems to have been the most wonderful and satisfying of lives, that word that sounds to my ear like Hebrew, like b'nai or boruch--benign! Benign! Boruch atoh Adonai, let it be benign! Blessed art thou O Lord Our God, let it be benign! Hear O Israel, and shine down thy countenance, and the Lord is One and honor thy father, and honor thy mother, and I will I promise I will--only let it be benign!

(p. 73)

It is, and as soon as the fact is ascertained, the combatants once again join in battle.

Portnoy's relationship with his father is as fraught with tension and ambiguity as that with his mother.6 Jack Portnoy is a constipated, anxiety ridden

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6 Harold Fisch (p. 41) correctly characterizes him "a totally ineffective and tangential figure" in the twentieth century tradition of the "replacement of the Jewish father by the Jewish mother."
guzzler of equal parts of mineral oil and milk of magnesia; truly one of life's victims, he is beset by his wacky family on one hand, and by his job on the other. His life is an endless struggle to squeeze pennies out of near indigents as an insurance agent for an exploitive company which ironically advertizes itself "The Most Benevolent Financial Institution in America."

Once a month he gains a brief respite from his travails by taking Alex to the Turkish baths. The memory is as idyllic for Portnoy as the recollection of playing center field for the Seabees.

The moment he pushes open the door the place speaks to me of prehistoric times, earlier even than the era of the cavemen and lake dwellers that I have studied in school, a time when above the oozing bog that was the earth, swirling white gases choked out the sunlight, and aeons passed while the planet was drained for Man. I lose touch instantaneously with that ass-licking little boy who runs home after school with his A's in his hand, the little overearnest innocent endlessly in search of the key to that unfathomable mystery, his mother's approbation, and am back in some sloopy watery time, before there were families such as we know them, before there were toilets and tragedies such as we know them, a time of amphibious creatures, plunging brainless hulking things, with wet meaty flanks and steaming torsos. It is as though all the Jewish men ducking beneath the cold dribble of shower off in the corner of the steam room, then lumbering back for more of the thick dense suffocating vapors, it is as though they have ridden the time-machine back to an age when they existed as some herd of Jewish animals, whose only utterance of oy, oy... for this is the sound they make as they drag themselves from the shower into the heavy gush of fumes. They appear, at long last, my father and his fellow sufferers, to have returned to the habitat in which they can be natural. A
place without goyim and women. (pp. 53-54)

Center field is also a place without goyim and women; the twin furies which pursue the adult Portnoy. Within this natural habitat of the baths, Portnoy feels nothing but pride for his father; even his genitalia is an object of veneration for the little boy, for there his father "was constructed like a man of consequence."

In the outside world, the pride is transmogrified to shame for there Jack is the archetypal schlemiel. Not only is he a pathetic loser at home and at work, but his competence in any sphere is seriously questioned by the young Alex; he discovers that his father doesn't even know how to grasp a bat properly! This disillusionment in Portnoy's "history of disenchantment" is especially significant considering that baseball becomes his central metaphor for a life of personal integration and achievement.

Nonetheless, as with his mother, in spite of all of Portnoy's complaints, a portrait of Jack emerges as an honest, devoted, hardworking and loving man. Portnoy's evaluation of his father's plight is fraught with rue: "To make life harder, he loved me himself."

The cumulative effect of his parents is ambivalence compounded. On one hand, "These two are the outstanding producers and packagers of guilt in our time." On the other, Portnoy proclaims the depth of his
love for them to the silent Spielvogel.

....I haven't even begun to mention everything I remember with pleasure--I mean with a rapturous, biting sense of loss! All those memories that seem somehow to be bound up with the weather and the time of day, and that flash into my mind with such poignancy, that momentarily I am not down in the subway, or at my office, or at dinner with a pretty girl, but back in my childhood, with them. Memories of practically nothing--and yet they seem moments of history as crucial to my being as the moment of my conception; I might be remembering his sperm nosing into her ovum, so piercing is my gratitude--yes, my gratitude! - so sweeping and unqualified is my love. Yes, me, with sweeping and unqualified love! (p. 29)

The upshot of all of this confusion is a rather bizarre self-perception: "Doctor Spielvogel, this is my life, my own life, and I'm living it in the middle of a Jewish joke." His lifetime engagement as the son in a Jewish joke "hoits, you know, there is pain involved...."

One effect of the pain is an extremely ambiguous sense of himself as a Jew in America.

Although many critics have seized upon Portnoy's

7 Ruth R. Wisse focuses on Roth's novel use of the joke: "The Jewish joke was conceived as an instrument for turning pain into laughter. Portnoy's Complaint reverses the process to expose the full measure of pain lurking beneath the laughter, suggesting that the technique of adjustment may be worse than the situation it was intended to alleviate." In The Schlemiel as Modern Hero (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 1971), p. 120. Portnoy himself makes much the same point when he laments "I can't live any more in a world given its meaning and dimension by some vulgar nightclub clown. By some--some black humorist!....Stories of murder and mutilation!" (p. 125)
more vehement proclamations as proof positive of his anti-Semitic self-hatred (here read Roth for Portnoy as well), this view is too simplistic to stand up to even a cursory examination of the novel. There is no doubt that Portnoy is a master of hyperbolic vituperation—directed at himself and the world at large. Nonetheless, just as a non-neurotic love periodically shines through for his parents (in spite of his attempt to blame them for his troubles), the same sort of dynamic of ambivalence operates with his identity as a Jew. At one level, being the son in a Jewish joke seems to account for the difficulties which have led him to the psychiatrist's couch; the responsibility for his life is thereby lifted from his shoulders and shunted onto the historical, social, and religious conditions endemic to those of his class and rank. And Portnoy does see himself as being but one of many.

....I am not in this boat alone, oh no, I am on the biggest troop ship afloat....only look in through the portholes and see us there, stacked to the bulkheads in our bunks, moaning and groaning with such pity for ourselves, the sad and watery-eyed sons of Jewish parents, sick to the gills from rolling through these heavy seas of guilt--so I sometimes envision us, me and my fellow wailers, melancholics, and wise guys, still in steerage, like our forefathers.... (pp. 132-33)

At the point he delivers this inventive analogy to Spielvogel, Portnoy is midway in his attempt at "fixing
the blame"--a good measure of his fitful progress thus far. In reaction to the humiliations (real and imagined) heaped upon his head, he periodically heaps scorn on the Jews; significantly, his most vehement attacks arise in the course of arguments with his parents. By characterizing Jewish history as "all that stupid saga shit," by protesting against the narrowmindedness of that "sour grape of a religion" on the grounds that "I happen to also be a human being!", Portnoy has at his disposal the ideal means to get at his parents. Needless to say, he continually plays this trump card to best effect, especially the ultimate rejection: atheism. "I would rather be a Communist in Russia than a Jew in a synagogue any day--so I tell my father right to his face, too."

There is only one thing worse than being a Jew; not being a Jew. In counterpoint to his disgust, the adolescent Portnoy experiences a growing sense of superiority to the "thuggish" goyim.

The goyim pretended to be something special, while we were actually their moral superiors. And what made us superior was precisely the hatred and the disrespect they lavished so willingly upon us! (p. 62)

Immediately following this pronouncement is an indication of the thirty-three year old Portnoy's growing ironic sense. He asks Spielvogel and himself the disquieting question. "Only what about the hatred we lavished
against them?" Despite this mild caveat, it is obvious that he feels the hatred is richly deserved much of the time. All is grist for his mill; even the hoopla accompanying Christmas comes under devastating attack. Lighted trees, "Silent Night" sounding through the streets, mangers: His reaction to all this is exasperation to say the least. "Really, it's enough to make you sick. How can they possibly believe this shit?"

And yet, (there always is an "and yet" with Portnoy), the goyim are the object of his heart-felt envy.

These people are the Americans, Doctor—like Henry Aldrich and Homer, like the Great Gulidersleeve and his nephew LeRoy, like Corliss and Veronica, like 'Oogie Pringle' who gets to sing beneath Jane Powell's window in A Date With Judy—these are the people for whom Nat 'King' Cole sings every Christmastime, 'Chestnuts roasting on an open fire, Jack Frost nipping at your nose.... An open fire, in my house? No, no, theirs are the noses whereof he speaks. Not his flat black one or my long bumpy one, but those tiny bridgeless wonders whose nostrils point northward automatically at birth. And stay that way for life! (pp. 163-64)

So the little boy who so fervently prays for victory against the Axis comes to feel himself an alien in his own land. Portnoy's ambiguous sense of himself as a man and Jew extends to his sense of himself as a "real" American. As far as he is concerned, the major effect of this sense of alienation will be a life-long pursuit of the forbidden shiksa.
What I'm saying, Doctor, is that I don't seem to stick my dick up these girls, as much as I stick it up their backgrounds—as though through fucking I will discover America. **Conquer America**—maybe that's more like it. (p. 265)

The question remains: Is his analysis correct or merely a clever justification for an endless series of outrageous sexual escapades? As ever, the answer must be a little of both.

With all of these psychic lacerations one would think that Portnoy would like nothing better than to obliterate all remnants of his painful past and move on to some brave new world. Curiously enough, the truth is just the opposite. In spite of all his bitter railing against his parents and Jewish heritage, Portnoy's most extensive exposition of his personal utopia is an idealization of the past—the world of his youth minus the "hoits."

The novel's last chapter, "In Exile," is largely Portnoy's recounting of his sexual misadventures in Israel, the powerful catalyst for his decision to seek psychiatric aid. Just as his plane is landing in Tel Aviv, Portnoy begins to weep "impaled upon a memory of Sunday morning softball games in Newark." Once again, as with his prelapsarian fantasy of the Turkish baths and his poignant memories of center field, Portnoy's longing for peace and simplicity and personal integration is
manifested. He recalls one of his favorite childhood pastimes, watching the neighborhood men play ball together, and is overcome: "Because I love those men! I want to grow up to be one of those men!" Not out of cloying sentimentality, but authentic affection mixed with regret, he delineates a vision of what his present should have been measured against the empty reality.  

Hard work in an idealistic profession: games played without fanaticism or violence, games played among like-minded people and with laughter; and family forgiveness and love. What was so wrong in believing in all that? What happened to the good sense I had at nine, ten, eleven years of age? How have I come to be such an enemy and flayer of myself? and so alone! Oh, so alone! Nothing but self! Locked up in me! Yes, I have to ask myself....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), I have, on two different evenings, taken to bed with me--coinstantaneously, as they say in the

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8 Barry Wallenstein maintains, "Pathetically, this is the one fantasy he is unable to put in action. All the others (and they are mainly of sexual performances) are sadly fulfilled in the real world." In "Remembering Mama With Rue," Catholic World, (June 1969), 130. Similarly, Eileen Z. Cohen in her comparison of the novel to Alice in Wonderland argues "Alex is indeed in Wonderland; his literal world is topsy-turvy. His real world is what other men fantasize, and his fantasies are of marrying and having children, playing softball and eating dinner." In "Alex in Wonderland, or Portnoy's Complaint," Twentieth Century Literature, 17 (July 1971), 161.
whorehouses—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! (pp. 279-80)

Scratch Portnoy the cynic and you will find a disillusioned romantic; scratch Portnoy the libertine and you will find a disillusioned traditionalist.

So much for Portnoy's version of the roots of his distressing ambivalence; on to its often hilarious but always bizarre effect on his behavior.

As a young boy, Alex simply cannot bridge the gap between the two opposite currents of his mother's treatment of him. He is confronted with either unqualified "smother" love or catastrophic rejection; in both cases, his unconditional surrender is demanded. His response is as schizophrenic as the contradictory stimuli he is subjected to. Alex is either an "ass-licking little boy," or a kicking, biting hellcat, spewing forth venom at his chief tormentor—his mother. In a revealing fantasy shading from Joyce to Kafka, Portnoy exposes much about the way he has come to deal with his bewildering childhood.

Say thank you, darling. Say you're welcome, darling. Say you're sorry, Alex. Say you're sorry! Apologize! Yeah, for what? What have I done now? Hey, I'm
hiding under my bed, my back to the wall, refusing to say I'm sorry, refusing, too, to come out and take the consequences. Refusing! And she is after me with a broom, trying to sweep my rotten carcass into the open. Why shades of Gregor Samsa! Hello Alex, goodbye Franz! 'You better tell me you're sorry, you, or else! And I don't mean maybe either! I am five, maybe six, and she is or-elsing me and not-meaning-maybe as though the firing squad is already outside, lining the street with newspaper preparatory to my execution. (p. 135)

The literary allusions to *A Portrait of The Artist As A Young Man* and "The Metamorphosis" operate in two distinct and contradictory ways. On one hand, putting the raw material of his childhood into this literary context performs a healing function in evoking and then defusing debilitating emotions. On the other hand, by identifying with Stephen Dedalus and Gregor Samsa, Portnoy's stature is unrealistically increased, thereby exacerbating his basic problem: fully coming to grips with the consequences of his predicament.

Kicking and biting his mother is no longer a viable option for the adolescent Portnoy. His revolt must take a new form and does: masturbation. 9 He

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9Although many critics are put off by this choice of subject matter, Lois G. Gordon lauds its salutory effect "in a culture where the onset of puberty is widely separated in time from the onset of regular intersexual gratification. It is to Roth's credit that he does so frankly deal with this most illicit and yet central experience of adolescence." In "Portnoy's Complaint: Coming of Age in Jersey City," *Literature and Psychology*, 19 (Nos. 3 & 4, 1969), 59.
confesses to Spielvogel that in answer to her unrelenting hectoring "furiously I grab that battered battering ram to freedom, my adolescent cock." And why? "My wang was all I really had that I could call my own."

What follows is a wild odyssey in the realm of self-abuse. Mere summary cannot do justice to the inventiveness and singleminded passion Portnoy brings to his solitary pursuit. Not only does he enumerate the most effective technique for any given situation, but he also chronicles the inumerable places and receptacles of his ejaculations. In bathrooms (at home and at school), on buses while sitting next to sleeping flaxen-haired shikses, in the Empire Burlesque House, behind billboards: No place is sacred to the priapic Portnoy. The receptacles for his sperm include Mounds Bar wrappers, cored apples, milk bottles, his sister's underwear, baseball mits, and, most horribly, liver. The latter marks the nadir of his descent into onanism.

I believe that I have already confessed to the piece of liver that I bought in a butcher shop and banged behind a billboard on the way to a bar mitzvah lesson. Well, I wish to make a clean breast of it, Your Holiness. That--she--it--wasn't my first piece. My first piece I had in the privacy of my own home, rolled round my cock in the bathroom at three-thirty--and then had again on the end of a fork at five-thirty, along with the other members of that poor innocent family of mine. So. Now you know the worst thing I have ever done. I fucked my own family's dinner. (p. 150)
All this is accomplished with the aid of frenzied fantasizing; it is always the mythical Thereal McCoy, the shiksa slut of his dreams, who speeds Portnoy on to his epic climaxes. Suffice it to say, he exhausts the possibilities of his subject matter as thoroughly as Whitman ever did in one of his interminable catalogues.

This is not to say that the "ass-licking little boy" has disappeared for good. He is reincarnated in a youth who now not only will do good for the benefit of his mother's approbation, but for the entire world's. A turning point is reached early one morning in the hinterlands of New Jersey while in a delivery truck with his future brother-in-law, Morty. Inspired by the time of day and season, and especially the reading of his grandiloquent morality play, "Let Freedom Ring," Portnoy experiences an epiphany: "to Morty, with tears of love (for him, for me) in my eyes, I vow to use 'the power of the pen' to liberate from injustice and exploitation, for humiliation and poverty and ignorance, the people I now think of (giving myself gooseflesh) as The People." Ironically, the man who cannot save himself will be a liberator of others. As Assistant Commissioner of Human Opportunity in
John Lindsay's Cabinet, Portnoy undeniably will do good (for others and for himself). The fly in the ointment is that his success will not be understood by his parents; far better that he had become a doctor!

Finally he graduates from abusing himself to abusing others: Portnoy discovers women. After a hysterically funny aborted encounter with a local floozy, Bubbles Girardi, his true initiation comes in his freshman year at Antioch. there he meets Kay Campbell, the "Pumpkin," from Davenport, Iowa, the heart of the heart of the country. She is a breed of female he has never before encountered: "Artless, sweet-tempered, without a trace of morbidity or egoism—a thoroughly commendable and worthy human being."

Tattooed on his wrist is the date of his personal Emancipation Proclamation—November 1950. That

10 Bernice W. Kliman (p. 18) cites this use of a historical personage (and the many other examples in the novel) as making for verisimilitude.

11 As Anatole Broyard correctly points out, "For the first half, the book is a sort of Moby Dick of masturbation; in the second part, Portnoy masturbates with girls, a change only in the dramatis personae." In "A Sort of Moby Dick," New Republic, 160 (March 1, 1969), 21.

12 "What could be more American than a girl named after the soup?" asks Kliman, (p. 22)
Thanksgiving, he forsakes the Portnoy household for a holiday at the Campbell's. At one point in his monologue he informs Spielvogel that the first distinction he came to make was between Jewish and goyische; now he is actually in the enemy camp. The reality is not quite what he expected after years of horrific propaganda from his parents. Portnoy is overwhelmed at the Campbell's; there he learns "The English language is a form of communication!" and not a deadly weapon. He generously credits Kay with fulfilling a basic civilizing function: She is the lady to his "barbarian."

Their rather idyllic relationship is abruptly terminated at the end of their junior year when Kay fears she is pregnant. They blissfully discuss marriage until he asks her, "And you'll convert, right?" With what he characterizes "common sense, plainly spoken," she retorts, "Why would I want to do a think like that?" Only it does not seem so reasonable to the enraged twenty year old.

I was, unfortunately, so astonished by my indignation that I couldn't begin to voice it. How could I be feeling a wound in a place where I was not even vulnerable? What did Kay and I care less about than one, money, and two, religion? Our favorite philosophy was Bertrand Russell. Our religion was Dylan Thomas' religion, Truth and Joy! Our children would be atheists. I had only been making a joke! (pp. 260-61)
Of course, it is not a joke. Kay turns out to be but the first "gentile heart broken" by Alexander, the Great Humanitarian.

The next belongs to another "flaxen beauty," Sarah Abbott Maulsby, better known as "The Pilgrim," of New Canaan, Foxcroft, and Vassar. Sarah not only is a "beautiful and adoring girl," but proper D.A.R. stuff to boot. 13

Imagine what it meant to me to know that generations of Maulsby's were buried in the graveyard at Newburyport, Massachusetts, and generations of Abbotts in Salem. Land where my fathers died, land of the Pilgrim's pride....

Exactly. (p. 267)

Nonetheless, he breaks off with her as well. Portnoy is put off by her "cutesy-wootsy boarding school argot" and her friends with their equally "cutesy-wootsy" nicknames. (In the clash of the two cultures, she finds his language--heavily flavored with Anglo-Saxonisms--equally appalling.) These are piddling reasons in comparison to his main complaint: She simply will not perform oral sex upon him. Portnoy is touched to the quick by this refusal, and feels he is the victim of discrimination. "My father couldn't rise at Boston & Northeastern for the same reason that Sally Maulsby

13Kliman (p. 23) correctly maintains, "Her background, of course, is exactly right for purposes of getting revenge on America."
wouldn't deign to go down on me!" The issue is that she comes from the same class which oppressed his father; his relationship with her is finally rationalized on his part as an act of retribution.

No, Sally Maulsby was just something nice a son once did for his dad. A little vengeance on Mr. Lindabury for all those nights and Sundays Jack Portnoy spent collecting down in the colored district. A little bonus extracted from Boston & Northeastern, for all those years of service, and exploitation. (p. 272)

It is obvious that Portnoy is as equally adept at consigning his female victims to oblivion as his predecessor, Gabe Wallach.

Once again, ambivalence reigns supreme. Portnoy purportedly loves and genuinely resents these women. Mention already has been made of his extraordinary analysis/rationalization of their attraction for him; by conquering these representative creatures, he conquers America. Ironically, the man who cried, "I am a human being too!" as a boy, and who dedicated himself to the good fight for social justice as a youth, can only enter into exploitive relationships, reducing his women to socio-economic and ethnic categories. Furthermore, implicit in his roundhouse condemnations of his mother is the assumption that an unresolved Oedipal complex is the ultimate cause of his psychic malady. These oversimplifications perform similar functions. The blame
does not fall on his own head, and Portnoy adroitly sidesteps the pain of awareness of his exploitive nature. Perhaps a bit closer to the heart of the matter is plain, old-fashioned revenge. As Portnoy confesses, what better or more elegant way for a man to "kill" a mother who always cautioned, "DON'T RUN FIRST THING TO A BLONDIE, PLEASE!" than to do precisely that. It is a classic piece of deviousness.

Of course! Let the shikse do the killing for you! You, you're just an innocent bystander! Caught in the crossfire! A victim, right.....? (pp. 213-14)

The best thing one can say about the relationships with "The Pumpkin" and "The Pilgrim" is that at least Portnoy did not hypocritically purport to be the educator and spiritual redeemer of these unfortunates. Such is not the case with his next adversary.

Enter Mary Jane Reed, a.k.a. "The Monkey," from the hill country of West Virginia. A divorced woman with a racy past and a stunning fashion model, "The Monkey" is Thereal McCoy Incarnate, the earthly embodiment of Portnoy's wildest orgiastic fantasies. Unfortunately, she also is illiterate and definitely not a woman one would normally take to a formal reception at Gracie Mansion. While it is Mary Jane's sexual acumen that Portnoy is obsessed with, for her he is
"Breakie"—her breakthrough to the world of the mind and "Jewish warmth." In short, each uses the other. As might be expected, their relationship is a short-lived one. Everything about her becomes a source of shame for Portnoy, especially "the ease with which I had plucked her off the street (the sexual triumph of my life!)...."

In reviewing the course of their relationship, Portnoy characteristically reduces her to a socio-economic category, while expressing his deepest fear.

Take her, I think to myself, and I am no higher in the evolutionary scale than the mobsters who choose their women from the line at the Copa.... Who looks at her with me knows precisely what I am after in this life.... Take her fully for my own, you see, and the whole neighborhood will know at last the truth about my dirty little mind. The so-called genius will be revealed in all his piggish proclivities and feelthy desires. (p. 226)

His fear of exposure is another psychological vestige of his mother's reign. It insinuates itself into every situation which she would find morally objectionable. As an adolescent, Portnoy furtively masturbates in a burlesque house all the while in deadly fear of a police raid; even as an adult, a slip of the tongue to an old crony elicits a paranoid reaction.

'So, uh, what do you do for pussy?'
'I have affairs, Arn, and I beat my meat.' Mistake, I think instantly. Mistake! What if he blabs to the Daily News? ASST HUMAN OPP'Y COMMISH FLOGS DUMMY, Also Lives in Sin, Reports
Old School Chum.
The headlines. Always the headlines revealing my filthy secrets to a shocked and disapproving world. (p. 197)

What Mary Jane lacks in education, she more than makes up with animal cunning. She is quick to pick up on her paramour's irrational fear. Thus, when see is disgusted by engaging in a *ménage à trois* with Portnoy and a whore in Rome (and realizing he will never marry her), she threatens him with exposure. She promises to call both Mayor Lindsay and Jimmy Breslin to inform them of his perfidy. This tactic eventually backfires in Athens when she threatens suicide in addition. Although the relationship finally breaks up as a consequence of this fiasco, even Mary Jane realized the end was in sight much earlier.

While on a vacation in the wilds of Vermont, Portnoy is astounded to discover he is actually beginning to feel something other than lust for Mary Jane. The realization gradually sinks in:

And yet it turns out that she is also a human being—yes, she gives every indication that this may be so! A human being! Who can be loved!

But by me?
Why Not?
Really?
Why not? (p. 219)

The answer is obvious: Crippled by his deficiency of consciousness, Portnoy can only run when the opportunity finally presents itself. He consoles himself by
accepting Freud's judgment on incestuously fixated men from the essay, "The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life": "Where such men love they have no desire, and where they desire they cannot love." Once again, he blames it on good old mom.

Fleeing his hysterical mistress in Athens, Portnoy makes for Israel, the ancestral spiritual homeland. There he is mortified by two devastating sexual experiences. The first is a fleeting encounter with an attractive lieutenant in the Israeli Army. The second is his "final downfall and humiliation--Naomi, The Jewish Pumpkin, The Heroine." With both women, Portnoy is impotent.

Naomi is an idealistic socialist, physically more than a little reminiscent of Sophie. The resemblance does not end there, for she does as thorough a job of brow-beating the hapless Portnoy as does his mother. Naomi castigates him personally and professionally: His self-deprecation is "ghetto humor," his position in Lindsay's administration is tantamount to putting a

\[14\] Kliman (p. 23) argues: "Naomi, in the bible, is Ruth's mother-in-law and thus a symbol of inter-racial reconciliation. Portnoy's impotence with her demonstrates that he is as yet unable to come to terms with his mixed American and Jewish heritage."
band-aid on the cancer of capitalism. Irrationally pledging his "love," he attempts to rape her, but is impotent; in lieu of intercourse, he offers to perform cunnilingus on her. Naomi disgustedly kicks him "just below the heart. The blow I had been angling for?" Portnoy has reached the nadir of his tortured quest for manhood.

My head went spinning, the vilest juices rose in my throat. Ow, my heart! And in Israel! Where other Jews find refuge, sanctuary and peace, Portnoy now perishes. Where other Jews flourish, I now expire! (p. 306)

One remaining component of Portnoy's deficiency of consciousness must be noted. When Naomi leaves, Portnoy laments, "my salvation! my kin!" That he looks to another to save him is as inauthentic as his penchant for putting the blame on his parents and cultural heritage for his own imperfections. Just as he must give up these "excuses," Portnoy must look to himself for salvation before he can make significant psychological progress.

The same dependence on others for salvation is evident in his perception of Spielvogel's role. At the end of his first monologue, Portnoy voices what it is he wants.

The way I respond to the simple vicissitudes of human life! Doctor, I can't stand any more being frightened like this over nothing! Bless me with
manhood! Make me brave! Make me strong!
Make me whole! (p. 40)

Later on, Portnoy defines just what he means by "Manhood."

Doctor, my doctor, what do you say, LET'S PUT THE ID BACK IN YID! Liberate this nice Jewish boy's libido, will you please? Raise the prices if you have to--I'll pay anything! (p. 139)

Although his catch phrase is amusing, it is obvious that Portnoy has little comprehension of what psychotherapy entails. The analyst is neither a secular priest, magically dispensing absolution and salvation, nor is he an agent of the "pleasure principle."

Suddenly, in the novel's concluding fantasy, Portnoy finally shakes relatively free of his rationalizations and misconceptions. As a result, the barrier of consciousness of the "open decision" is breached as he accepts the responsibility for his own life. It is a fantasy of judgment, the novel's second. After the first, Portnoy continues his vain attempt at self-justification, an attempt which now mercifully terminates in exhaustion. He is on the stand, accused of violating the humanity of Mary Jane Reed. Although he argues that she herself holds some responsibility, and that others are far more guilty of the exploitation of their fellow man (both objections are quite valid), there is nary a word shifting his culpability to the traditional scapegoats. Instead, he properly struggles to put his real
guilt in perspective, something Portnoy has heretofore proved incapable of doing.

God forbid I should tear the tag from my mattress that says, "Do Not Remove Under Penalty of Law"—what would they give me for that, the chair? It makes me want to scream, the ridiculous disproportion of the guilt! May I? Will that shake them up too much out in the waiting room? Because that's maybe what I need most of all, to howl. A pure howl, without any more words between me and it!

'This is the police speaking. You're surrounded, Portnoy. You better come on out and pay your debt to society.' "Up society's ass, Copper!" 'Three to come out with those hands of yours up in the air, Mad Dog, or else we come in after you, guns blazing. One.' 'Blaze, you bastard cop, what do I give a shit? I tore the tag off my mattress-' 'Two.' '-But at least while I lived, I lived big!' (p. 309)

The comic distortion achieved by this grade B movie death scene successfully punctures his own pretensions of sinful grandeur. Portnoy's recognition of the ridiculous disproportion of his psychic punishment, the ironic knowledge that he has not "lived big," the acceptance of responsibility for how he actually lived—all this constitutes a very real breakthrough for him. It is this breakthrough of consciousness, signalled by the metaphoric "death" of the "old" Portnoy (not once, but twice), which gives rise to the hope voiced in Spielvogel's closing "punch line": "So....Now vee may
perhaps to begin. Yes?" 15

While Portnoy manages to put his real guilt in perspective, his breakthrough is by no means complete; as Roth insists, "Portnoy proceeds on through the fractured mortar, only to be lodged there, half in, half out." Portnoy's victory is but the first step (as Spielvogel cautions, the beginning) in the struggle for the true consciousness of the "open decision." Although he has disabused himself of the notion that others are responsible for his predicament, Portnoy is not yet liberated from the fantasies and fixations which plague him: In short, he is still as neurotic as ever. In his introductory discussion, Bryant emphasizes the significance of Freudian theory as a cornerstone and reflection of the philosophy of the "open decision." Bryant's analysis sheds a great deal of light on how far Portnoy must go before he achieves true consciousness.

15 In an article subtitled "Therapy notes found in the files of Dr. O. Spielvogel, a New York Psychoanalyst," Bruno Bettelheim argues the fantasy of judgment "raises the hope that analysis might succeed." Spielvogel therefore does not dismiss him "as I had planned." In "Portnoy Psychoanalyzed," Midstream, 15 (June-July 1969), 3.
The main aim of psychoanalysis is the dissolution of the neurosis, the expansion of consciousness which will reveal the authentic self and the motives by which it operates, and the liberation of the self. Psychoanalysis does not transform the individual into something different, any more than the embracing of the contradictions. It should, however, change the subject's attitude toward his condition and thereby modify the quality of his existence. (TOD, p. 79)

Portnoy, the psychoanalytic tyro, is nowhere near the dissolution of his neuroses. And as Bryant cautions: "Until that happens the individual's freedom of choice is curtailed by neurotic symptoms that are compulsive, his authentic self is hidden, and his individual satisfaction is diminished." (TOD, p. 84) It will fall to David Kepesh, the ultimate stage in Roth's explosive projectile, to achieve a decisive victory of consciousness.

As might be expected, the publication of as extravagant a novel as Portnoy's Complaint resulted in equally extravagant reviews. Cued by the appearance of excerpts in Esquire, Partisan Review, and New American Review as early as April 1967, critics had sufficient time to either sharpen their knives or prepare their praise. Most reviewers focused on the controversial aspects of the novel: Its concern with sexuality and the obscenity present on nearly every page. At one extreme, the anonymous reviewer for Virginia Quarterly Review found the novel unendurable: "So corrosive and caprophilic
a recital cannot of itself easily qualify as literature....  

De gustibus non est disputandum."¹⁶ At a more sophisticated level, Irving Howe condemned the novel as a work of vulgarity.

By vulgarity in a work of literature I am not here talking about the presence of certain kinds of words or the rendering of certain kinds of actions. I have in mind, rather, the impulse to submit the rich substance of human experience, sentiment, value, and aspiration to a radically reductive leveling or simplification.¹⁷

He also charged Roth with patronizing his characters—a lack of "dispassionate objectivity"¹⁸ which, according to Howe, is another component of vulgarity. At the other extreme, Brenden Gill elevated Roth to a position on the outskirts of "the great pornographers and scatologists—Rabelais, Restif de la Bretonne, Shakespeare, Rochester, Joyce, Céline."¹⁹ Surely, neither the extreme condemnation nor the overblown praise is warranted. Curiously enough, perhaps it is Roth himself who puts this entire problem in its proper context.

¹⁶Virginia Quarterly Review, 45 (Summer 1969), lxxxviii.

¹⁷Howe, p. 76.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 77.

¹⁹Brendan Gill, "The Unfinished Man," New Yorker, 45 (March 8, 1969), 118.
To begin with, his account of the novel's genesis is especially valuable. Kafka emerges as a major influence in the creation of Portnoy.

I had read somewhere that he used to giggle to himself while he worked. Of course! It was all so funny, this morbid preoccupation with punishment and guilt. Hideous, but funny...not until I had got hold of guilt, you see, as a comic idea, did I begin to feel myself lifting free and clear of my last book and my old concerns.20

Of course, many critics were less than enthralled with his new concerns! In an interview published in The New York Times Book Review the day the novel was reviewed there, Roth frankly defended the novel's openness on the basis of the rich tradition it sprang from:

"Obscenity as a usable and valuable vocabulary, and sexuality as a subject, have been available to us since Joyce, Henry Miller, and Lawrence...."21 Of much more importance is his artistic rationale for the use of obscenity in this particular book:

....this is a man speaking out of an overwhelming obsession: He is obscene because he wants to be saved. An odd, maybe even mad, way to go about seeking personal salvation; but, nonetheless, the

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20 Roth, "On Portnoy's Complaint," RMO, p. 22. A fascinating account of the actual components which went into the book (the conjoining of fantastic and realistic elements from four abandoned projects) is detailed in "In Response to Those Who Have Asked Me: How Did You Come To Write That Book, Anyway?" RMO, pp. 33-41.

21 Ibid., p. 17.
investigation of this passion, and of the combat that it precipitates with his conscience, is what's at the center of the novel. Portnoy's pain arises out of his refusal to be bound any longer by taboos which, rightly or wrongly, he experiences as diminishing and unmanning. The joke on Portnoy is that for him the breaking of the taboo turns out to be as unmanning in the end as honoring it. Some joke.²²

Valuable (albeit a mite heavyhanded) corroboration for Roth's justification on traditional and artistic grounds is given by Rush Rankin:

...Ihab Hassan writing about Henry Miller in The Literature of Silence... contends that obscenity is a means of establishing the elemental power of language, that obscenity penetrates and exposes the hypocritical facades of human thought and language. Perhaps Portnoy is searching for ontological freedom. His mode of narrative expression is one attempt to destroy the restrictions imposed from outside the self. His language declares that nothing is beyond consideration, that no aspect of the human condition can be legitimately hidden.²³

As for Howe's contention that the novel is vulgar because of a "radically reductive leveling" of human experience, it appears that he is missing much of what Roth is about in the novel. In Roth's words, Portnoy's Complaint "revolves upon the ironies of the struggle for personal freedom."²⁴ The ironies and ambiguities are maintained to the very end; since they are, Howe's accusation of reductivism is simply not justified. The opposite view-

²³Rankin, p. 246.
point is persuasively elucidated in a lengthy and insightful essay by Patricia Spacks:

....the detail of the novel, social and sexual, fills out a metaphor of the human condition in the twentieth century. Portnoy sees his own problems as problems of his Jewishness, but readers are not obliged to share his view. Indeed, they are invited to understand the suffering and the comedy of Alexander Portnoy are the suffering and comedy of modern man, who seeks and finds explanations for his plight but is unable to resolve it, whose understanding is as limited as his sense of possibility, who is forced to the analyst to make sense of his experience.25

A coherent perception of the human condition indeed does emerge from Roth's canon. Perhaps the most evocative and succinct definition appears in his latest novel, The Professor of Desire. In response to an examination question on Anton Chekhov, one of David Kepesh's more sensitive students writes the following: "We are born innocent....we suffer terrible disillusionment before we can gain knowledge, and then we fear death--and we are granted only fragmentary happiness to offset the pain."

CHAPTER V

STAGE THREE: THE BREAST AND THE PROFESSOR OF DESIRE

Much can be inferred about any man on the basis of what he finds estimable and praiseworthy in another. While denying the possible influence of Lenny Bruce on Portnoy's Complaint, Roth did find much to value in the tormented comedian's technique: "I recognize and admire in him what I used to like about the Second City Company at its best, that joining of precise social observation with extravagant and dreamlike fantasy."1 Three years later, in 1972, the literary world was stunned by the publication of The Breast.2 While clearly


indebted to Kafka's "The Metamorphosis," the novella was also an obvious attempt to execute the same effect achieved by Bruce and The Second City Company.

Following the appearance the previous year of the anti-Nixon satire, Our Gang, the novella, a bizarre tale of a man transformed into a breast, was nonetheless a return to the familiar territory staked out in Portnoy's Complaint. In an interview with Alan Lelchuk, while insisting upon the "differing emphasis and implications" of the two works, Roth precisely articulated their common subject matter.

Speaking broadly, it's the struggle to accommodate warring (or, at least, contending) impulses and desires, to negotiate some kind of inner peace or balance of power, or perhaps just to maintain hostilities at a low destructive level, between the ethical and social yearnings and the implacable, singular lusts for the flesh and its pleasures. The measured self vs. the insatiable self. The accommodating self vs. the ravenous self. In these works of fiction, of course, the sides are not this clearly drawn, nor are they in opposition right on down the line. These aren't meant to be diagrams of conflicting 'selves' anyway but stories of men experiencing the complicated economies of human satisfaction, men in whom spiritual ambitions and sensual ambitions are inextricably bound up with the overarching desire to somehow achieve their own true purpose.3

In spite of this similarity, the two works differ widely in their form, tone, and structure.

3Roth, "On The Breast," RMO, p. 70.
Alexander Portnoy's psychoanalytic confession is replaced by what David Kepesh terms a "lecture." Portnoy's shrill, hysterical tone is modulated into what Roth attests is an "overriding (and, I think in the circumstances, ironic) tone of reasonableness." Although this characterization is correct for the most part, nonetheless there are several occasions when Kepesh directs some rather bitter invective at his audience ("Go, you sleek, self-satisfied Houyhnhnms, and moralize on that!"). Finally, whereas the structure of Portnoy's Complaint is generally chronological and ordered by the logic of free association, that of The Breast is chronological and ordered by the logic of rhetorical discourse. The first chapter is an introductory exposition of the pertinent past. The next three form the body of Kepesh's argument: Evidence is presented and opposing views are refuted. Roth himself focuses on this aspect of the novella:

The Breast proceeds, in fact, by attempting to answer the objections and the reservations that might be raised in a skeptical reader by its own fantastic premise. It has the design of a rebuttal or a rejoinder, rather than a hallucination or a nightmare.  

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4 Roth, "On The Breast," RMO, p. 73.
5 Ibid., p. 68.
The rebuttal is in the form of the rejection and exhaustion of the various explanations for his predicament which Kepesh propounds to his psychiatrist, Dr. Klinger. Finally, he, as well as his audience, is forced to accept Klinger's insistence on the truth: "Nothing 'did it.'" The final chapter is a classical peroration. Kepesh recapitulates his harrowing conclusion ("This is not a tragedy any more than it is a farce. It is only life, and, like it or not, I am only human."), and ends with an evocative and challenging exhortation: Rilke's poem entitled "Archaic Torso of Apollo," especially its closing line—"You must change your life."

His hard-won acceptance of this admonition is the critical factor in making David Kepesh the final stage in Roth's explosive projectile directed at the barrier of consciousness of the "open decision": "It remains for Kepesh to pass right on through the bloodied hole, and out the other end, into no-man's-land."

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6 It seems quite probable that the projectile analogy has as its origin (whether consciously or unconsciously on Roth's part) Kepesh's description of the agony of his transformation: "All I could remember of the night in my apartment was the pain and the terror: to me it had felt as though I was being fired over and over again from a cannot into a brick wall, and then stomped on by an army of boots." (p. 21)
The opening chapter of *The Breast* immediately establishes David Kepesh as a reliable narrator, a serious and philosophical student of life. Gone is the hyperbolic self-aggrandizement of Alexander Portnoy. Instead of his head-long free-associative flight into the perceived roots of his psychic ills, a more meditative pose is maintained.

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. Still and all I would submit to you, in all humility, that some things are more wondrous than others, and I am one such thing. (pp. 1-2)

In addition, Kepesh's over-all physical and mental health is vouched for: Not only is he the world's healthiest ex-hypochondriac, but the previous year successfully concluded five years of psychoanalysis. This tactic is a necessary counterbalance to the incredible tale which will unfold and serves well Roth's stated intention of ambiguity: "I want the fantastic situation to be accepted as taking place in what we call the real world, at the same time that I hope to make the reality of the horror one of the issues of the story."  

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7 Roth, "On *The Breast,*" *RMO,* p. 67.
Further increasing the audience's "willing suspension of disbelief" is the scientifically dispassionate account of his physical symptoms prior to the transformation: A tingling sensation in the groin, followed by the appearance of a reddish discoloration at the base of the penis after an "incubation period" of twenty-one days (at "just midnight, according to the magically minded the time at which transformations take place"); finally, an incredibly heightened sexual appetite for his lover, "Pleasure-giving Claire."

Claire, the product of an unhappy childhood, and David, the survivor of a Grand Guignol marriage and "lacerating divorce," had settled down into a comfortable existence, living together while maintaining separate apartments (a modus vivendi familiar from the Gabe Wallach-Martha Reganheart relationship). In the course of their three years together, a normal, albeit disquieting, reduction in Kepesh's sexual desire had set in. Only now, in the midst of my plenty, there was this diminishing of desire for the very woman who had helped so to fashion my new life of contentment. It was a depressing, bewildering development, and try as I might, I seemed unable to alter it. Finally, I just did not care at all about touching her or being touched. I was, in fact, scheduled to pay a visit to my former analyst to discuss with him this loss of sexual appetite for Claire when out of the blue again, I was suddenly more passionate than I had ever been before with her or with anyone. (p. 11)
The faithful reader of Roth has heard this lament before. Perhaps no more instructive distinction can be drawn between Kepesh and his fellow sufferer, Portnoy, than Alex's characteristic ranting and raving on the same topic. After an incredibly obscene description of the sexual proclivities of various women, Portnoy gets down to business.

What a mysterious business it is! The endless fascination of these apertures and openings! You see, I just can't stop! Or tie myself to any one. I have affairs that last as long as a year, a year and a half, months and months of love, both tender and voluptuous, but in the end--it is as inevitable as death--time marches on and lust peters out. (PC, p. 116)

All in all, the distance between the two men is vast in spite of their common difficulty. One of the bridges between the two is their ability at times to "see the joke" in their respective predicaments. Kepesh's words could be spoken just as easily by Portnoy: "If only I could sustain the laughter for more than a few seconds, however--if only it wasn't so brief and so bitter."

The second chapter chronicals Kepesh's struggle to properly define himself and to find an explanation for his predicament. Keeping with the novella's structure as a piece of rhetorical discourse, the process of definition proceeds by description, by comparison, and by example.
The chapter opens with a flat, scientifically detached, definition by description.

I 'am a breast. A phenomenon that has been variously described as 'a massive hormonal influx,' 'an endocrinopathic catastrophe,' and/or 'a hermaphroditic explosion of chromosomes' took place within my body between midnight and four A.M. on February 18, 1971, and converted me into a mammary gland such as could only appear, one would have thought, in a dream or a Dali painting. They tell me that I am now an organism with the general shape of a football, or a dirigible; I am said to be of a spongy consistency, weighing in at one hundred and fifty-five pounds....and measuring, still, six feet in length. (pp. 15-16)

The objective description proceeds for another six paragraphs, detailing the breast's physiology, color, texture, hairs, and so on. David can "neither see, smell, taste, or move"; the only senses to remain are the auditory and tactile. Obviously, this form of definition does not fully account for the reality of David Kepesh, the breast, so definition by comparison is utilized: He comes to think of himself as a porpoise or whale.

I think of these aquatic animals because of the over-all resemblance I now bear to them in size and shape, and because the porpoise in particular is said to be an intelligent, perhaps even a rational, creature. I am a kind of porpoise, I tell myself, for whatever profound or whimsical reason. A beached whale. Jonah in the whale. 'Fish out of water will do'--one of those jokes I am unable to suppress.... (pp. 31-32)

This is still not quite enough to define the reality; a number of characteristic Rothian motifs emerge, all
defining by example Kepesh's continuing link to humanity.

Much to his amazement, when his nurse washes his nipple, Kepesh experiences Portnoy's ultimate masturbatory fantasy: "But then the sensations were almost more than could be borne... but more intense, it seemed, for coming to me in a state of utter helplessness, in utter darkness, and from a source unknown to me, seemingly immense and dedicated solely to my pleasure." Just as Portnoy fears exposure, David is deeply disturbed at the idea his masturbation is being observed by others: He feels shame, but then much more.

You see, it is not a matter of doing what is right or seemly; I am not concerned, I can assure you, with the etiquette of being a breast. It is rather doing what I would do if I would continue to be me. And I would, for if not me, who? what? Either I continue to be myself, or I will go mad, and then I will surely die. (pp. 27-28)

Just as only a human can feel shame, only a human can fear death: "Horrible as This is, my oldest and most heartless enemy, Extinction, still strikes me as even worse." The confession of his terror is highly significant. No such forthright declaration has been uttered by any of his predecessors. Surely it is not simply a matter of their being too young to be concerned with death. A more logical explanation for Kepesh being the first to consciously confront the fact of his own mortality is his unique position as the final stage of Roth's projectile;
as such, his is the benchmark against which the deficiency of consciousness of the other protagonists is measured. In any case, Dr. Klinger assured him that he is alive due to his very human "strength of character" and "will to live." The persistence with which he holds on to his human identity is finally epitomized by the concept of responsibility to which he clings:

....there is, or course, the intellectual responsibility I seem to have developed to the uniqueness and enormity of my misfortune. WHAT DOES IT MEAN? HOW HAS IT COME TO PASS? AND WHY? IN THE ENTIRE HISTORY OF THE HUMAN RACE, WHY DAVID ALAN KEPESH? (p. 32)

In the remainder of the novella, Kepesh will exercise his responsibility in the attempt to answer these perplexing questions.

The process of coming to terms with his life begins even before he is told by Klinger what it is he has become. His first tentative explanation is that he is a quadruple amputee, the casualty of a catastrophic boiler explosion. Klinger's revelation of the truth understandably triggers his first major crisis. Once over the initial shock, Kepesh's quest for meaning begins in earnest; ironically, part and parcel of this quest is an education in what it truly means to be human. Just as Kepesh must discard his first explanation for his condition in light of what Klinger tells him, he must
go through a process of "rebuttal," first positing, then rejecting, and, finally, exhausting a great number of explanations for his plight.

The first comes out of an anecdote of sexual satiety. Lying on a sand dune with Claire's breast in his mouth, Kepesh, feeling like "some Poseidon or Zeus," puts off her desire to go home and make love. She removes her breast from his mouth, jokingly saying, "I don't want to cut off your air. You were turning green." His reply is "made to charm and to flatter rather than to come true": "With envy."

Yes, that I said. I admit openly that I said it. And if this were a fairy tale we would now understand the moral: 'Beware fanciful desires; you may get lucky.' But this is a true story, if not for you, reader, for me....No, the victim does not subscribe to the wish-fulfillment theory, and I advise you not to, neat and fashionable and delightfully punitive as it may be. Reality is grander than that. Reality has more style. There. For those of you who cannot live without one, a moral to this tale. 'Reality has style,' concludes the embittered professor who became a female breast. Go, you sleek, self-satisfied Houyhnhnms, and moralize on that! (pp. 48-49)

However, there are several theories which he momentarily does give credence to. He may be in the throes of a dream or a hallucination or a drug-induced state. Surely the "scientific answers" tendered by Klinger ("a hermaphroditic explosion of chromosomes," "a volcanic secretion of 'mammogenic' fluids") are impossible in this universe.
The catalyst for David's second crisis, a crisis "of faith," is a visit from his old mentor and present boss, Arthur Schonbrunn, Dean of Arts and Sciences at Stony Brook. Arthur is the first to visit him in his altered state other than medical personnel, Claire and his father. He is the archetypal "Kennedyesque" academic politician, "Spectacularly suave" and confident. It is his unexpected reaction which convinces Kepesh that he is actually mad. Schonbrunn howls with laughter, so that "he couldn't even speak coherently. Arthur Schonbrunn unable to speak coherently." This reaction, or perceived reaction, is proof positive to Kepesh that he is insane: "How could I ever have accepted such an utterly paranoid delusion for the truth?" Klinger's entirely reasonable rejoinder, "He is beyond the perils of human nature, this Dean," is quickly shunted aside. In fact, Kepesh develops a new hypothesis to deal with Klinger's hardheaded anti-mythologizing of his plight.

...why then is Dr. Klinger telling me that my sanity depends upon my accepting my condition, that my sanity depends upon learning how to maintain my equilibrium despite this horrendous accident, when in fact the way back to health is clearly to challenge, to defy, this preposterous conception of myself. The answer was obvious: That wasn't at all what Dr. Klinger was saying. In the service of my disease I was taking his words, simple and clear as they undoubtedly were, and giving them precisely the opposite meaning from that which he intended for them. (p. 75)
Of course, only by accepting his condition will Kepesh achieve the true consciousness of the "open decision."

The acceptance will be a long time in coming.

"Grasping at straws," he develops four theories to account for his madness. Perhaps the power of fiction did it. Influenced by his teaching of Kafka's "The Metamorphosis," Gogol's "The Nose," and Swift's Gulliver's Travels, and traumatized by some unknown incident, he has latched onto the fantasy of being a breast in order to avoid coming to grips with the trauma. He goes so far as to hypothesize why he chose this particular delusion. (Possible answers: "Mammary envy," he is "just another boy raised on a diet too rich with center-folds....Or, or, or.") Perhaps the delusion is a post-analytic collapse so that he can once again cling to his psychiatrist, Dr. Klinger. Perhaps he couldn't face the fruits of his hard-won psychological victory.

Perhaps the delusion is due to guilt he feels in gloating about his ex-wife's troubles. One by one, Klinger, the agent of "Mr. Reality," debunks all of these "explanations."

'And now you think you are punishing yourself with madness for such ordinary, everyday malice? Come off it, Mr. Kepesh."

'I'm saying that the prospect of my own happiness was too much for me! That's why the sex began to cool down with Claire, too! So much satisfaction frightened me! Seemed radically unjust! My guilt!'

'Oh, come off it, Mr. Kepesh. That is analysis right out of the dime store. Such religiosity. Such self-congratulation in the guise of objective
thinking. From a man of your sophistication, no less.

'Then if not that, what? Help me! What did it!' 'Nothing 'did it.' 'Then why am I mad? 'But you're not.'" (pp. 94-95)

Klinger's contribution to Kepesh's attempt to come to terms with his life intellectually cannot be underestimated; no less important are the emotional and spiritual contributions made by his father and by Claire.

Kepesh suffers none of the debilitating ambivalence towards his parents experiences by Portnoy. He considers his father "a great and noble man"; his son's transformation is stoically accepted and his fatherly nurturing continues unabated. Even his errors are those of the heart and therefore excusable (as when he agrees with David that he is mad, a serious set-back in his battle to accept his lot). His deceased mother is also the recipient of unadulterated praise: "Isn't it from my mother that I inherited my determination to begin with? Isn't it to her example that I owe my survival?" While he gains the emotional strength to cope from his parents, he gains much more from Claire. It is only through her love and devotion that he is finally able to come to grips with his sexual nature.

Claire will do for him what he admits he could never do for her were the tables turned: she "makes love" to his nipple by squeezing and kissing it. Of course,
there is no release; nonetheless, he wants MORE....

vaginal intercourse.

What alarmed me so about giving in to this grotesque yearning was that by so doing I might be severing myself irreparably from my own past and my own kind. I was afraid that if I were to become habituated to such practices, my appetites could only become progressively strange, until at last I reached a peak of disorientation from which I would fall—or leap—into the void. I would go mad. I would cease to know who I had been or what I was. I would cease to know anything. And even if I would not die as a result, what would I have become but a lump of flesh and no more. (p. 56)

With Klinger's guidance and Claire's forebearance, he finally learns "if not to extinguish, at least...to tolerate" his cravings. Once this victory over himself is achieved, Kepesh is even able to cut in half the time previously spent in masturbation. Motivated by his fear of alienating Claire, he has mastered an important lesson Portnoy never could learn: Sex is secondary to "maintaining ordinary human contact."

"Tolerating it," renouncing the claims of the flesh where they violate another, is the first step in his consuming struggle to tolerate all aspects of his condition.

The acceptance, grim as it must be, comes in the concluding chapter, the peroration of Kepesh's "lecture." It is fifteen months later; Kepesh lives "in a state of relative calm," listening to and
memorizing records of Shakespearean tragedies. One night while mimicking Olivier's delivery of the death scene from Othello, he abruptly stops short.

But then I realized that I was being observed.... Why should I want to appear any more foolish, or any more pathetic than I already do? I said to myself, 'Come now, David, it is all to poignant and heartbreaking, a breast reciting 'And say besides, that in Aleppo once....' You will send the scientists home in tears.' Bitterness, reader, a shallow sort of bitterness at that, but then permit my dignity a rest, won't you? This is not tragedy any more than it is farce. It is only life, and, like it or not, I am only human. (pp. 103-04)

Furthermore, he vigilantly maintains his perspective, denying "the delusions of grandeur" of having "out-Kafkaed Kafka." Klinger's warning, "No, hormones are hormones, and art is art," is finally taken to heart. He also must guard against delusions of frivolity and depravity ("If the Beatles can fill Shea Stadium so can I"; if they and the Rolling Stones and Charles Manson can have groupies, well, then, so can he). Klinger, once again the agent of Mr. Reality, cautions his patient when Kepesh expresses the desire to show himself to the public.

'Of course, the madmen and the morons out there will get it wrong anyway, you know, regardless of how precise and scrupulous you try to make your report. So you will not be taken on your own terms, ever, you know--this you must realize beforehand.' 'You mean, I'll always be a joke?' 'To many, yes. A joke. A grotesque. A charlatan. Of course.' (pp. 110-11)
And so, addressing the "morons and madmen, tough guys and skeptics, friends, students, relatives, colleagues, and all you strangers...my fellow mammalians," David Kepesh concludes his lecture with Rilke's poem, particularly directing his reader's attention to "his concluding admonition, which is not necessarily as elevated a sentiment as we all might have once liked to believe. Yes, let us proceed with our education, one and all."
The concluding admonition? "You must change your life."

At last David Kepesh has broken through "that barrier of personal inhibition, ethical conviction and plain old monumental fear beyond which lies the moral and psychological unknown." He has explored terra incognita where no other Roth hero has dared tread. All of his predecessors have been defeated by their "deficiency of consciousness, producing an inability to embrace the conditions of life--uncertainty, ambiguity, death, other people, their own choices."8 Unlike Portnoy, who believes all his ills are easily reducable to causes x, y, and z, and who depends on others to magically "save" him, Kepesh recognizes the inauthenticity of an illusory flight from the awareness of the essence of the human condition: Life is a

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8 Refer to text above, Chapter I, p. 8.
mystery, not reducable to easy answers. His isolation, compounded by the sexual frustration he must endure, is as hellish a metaphor for the human condition as one could imagine. There can be no release for Kepesh, neither from his sexual frustration, nor from the psychological and spiritual frustration it embodies. Nonetheless, The Breast is the most positive of Roth's works thus far, in that Kepesh's education leads him to a deeper and fuller knowledge of what it means to be a human being. Although he is ultimately alone, as all men are, he is lifted out of his solipsistic universe through the empathy of his fellow man: Dr. Klinger, his father, and Claire--their strength, concern, devotion, and love furnish the support without which David Kepesh no doubt would lapse into madness.

The question remains: Why is it necessary for Roth to utilize such a bizarre vehicle for the "lecture" Kepesh delivers? Why the transformation, especially when such thorough-going pains are taken to deny its mythological, moralistic, and allegorical implications? The answer very well might be the settled groove Kepesh finds himself in before the transformation. He has become solidly and comfortably entrenched in his roles, intellectual postures, emotional relationships, and
spiritual concerns. The transformation not only acts as a catalyst for the self-questioning and awareness he must endure, but its very extravagance implies the tremendous difficulty in confronting the question of what it means to be a human being. This problem is not so easily ignored when one no longer has the outward appearance of humanness. This, of course, is the central irony upon which the novella is structured. In order to be fully human, it is first necessary for David Kepesh to take on the monstrous form of a breast. Nonetheless, his "monstrousness" is put into perspective by Kepesh's satirical reference to the ease with which Charles Manson could get girls. Who is the greater monster? The creature who would initiate "Helter-skelter"--a racial cataclysm--so that he can bring on a "new order" with himself as fuehrer or David Kepesh? Obviously, it is not the man who instructs his disciples to turn to Rilke; just as obviously, an analysis of "Archaic Torso of Apollo" as the poem applies to David Kepesh is necessary for the full appreciation of The Breast.

As to the sculpture which inspired Rilke's poem, according to C.F. MacIntyre, "In the Archaic Room of the Louvre are three torsos of Apollo, but that from the Theater of Miletus, early fifth century, so overwhelms
those from Actium and Paros that one is certain it is the subject of the poem."

In Greek Mythology, Apollo is not only the god of light and truth, but the god of poetry as well. His oracle at Delphi, the Omphalos, the navel of the world, is the direct link between the gods and man. Furthermore, it is significant that the dolphin is one of the creatures sacred to Apollo, for it is precisely this mammal which Kepesh identifies with.

Rilke's poem has a simple structure: It opens with a description of the torso and the special quality it possesses; five examples of how the torso would be were it special quality not present are given; the concluding admonition is delivered. The opening description:

We did not know his legendary head, in which the eyeballs ripened. But his torso still glows like a candelbrum in which his gaze, only turned low, holds and gleams. (p. 112)

The eyes, the mirrors of the soul, are gone, yet the spiritual power they conveyed is present in the torso. In other words, the torso, the body, is infused with spirit, and this is what gives the stone its meaning and grandeur.

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Of the five examples of how the torso would be deficient were its special property lacking, all but the fourth are directly applicable to David Kepesh. The first, "Else could not the/ curve/ of the breast blind you," clearly can be applied not only to the sculpture, but to Kepesh as well. Were the ethereal essence of the torso and of Kepesh absent, were the stone and the flesh not infused with spirit, neither would have any power over his respective audience. The second, "nor in the/ slight turn/ of the loins could a smile be running/ to that middle, which carried/ procreation," is a direct statement of the sexual and spiritual reconciliation which Kepesh so desperately longs to achieve, and which is embodied in Apollo. The third example, "Else would this stone be standing/ maimed and short/ under the shoulder's translucent/ plunge," is again appropriate to both. Quite clearly, the two are physically similar in shape. Kepesh, like the stone, would be nothing but a monstrosity, "maimed and short," were not the flesh impregnated with spirit.

While the next example, "nor flimmering like the fell of beasts/ of prey," has no direct relevance for Kepesh, the final stanza most assuredly does.

nor breaking out of all its contours like a star: for there is no place that does not see you. You must change your life. (p. 113)
by necessity, David Kepesh has learned to change his life: His refusal to go on "maimed and short," his recognition of the responsibility for his own life, his acceptance of Klinger's injunction, "Tolerate it," have all given him his painful victory of consciousness. The "lecture" is at an end.

Needless to say, the critics once again had a field day with Roth. A quick perusal of some of the titles of their reviews tells one quite enough: "Uplift," "Clean Breast," "A Suitable Case for Mastectomy," "Falsie," "Braless in Gaza," "Literary Titillations." Totally misperceiving the novella's intention, many of the critics simply did not know what to make of a book which so thoroughly destroyed specious preconceptions left over from Portnoy's Complaint. The impression garnered from more than one review was that of the critic's total puzzlement: What kind of double-cross is Roth pulling now? Especially those critics (Howe, for one) who had misread Portnoy as Roth's paean to the untrammeled id were left befuddled. While obviously not taking the usual moralistic stance, Mark Shechner shrewdly isolated a major point of confusion.

The Breast is so unsettling a book, for to us, Kepesh's 'mature' prescription of a daily anesthetic to reduce his polymorphous appetites reinforced by therapeutic doses of Shakespeare seem like a defeatest strategy for a meager
endurance. We want a magical release from breast­
hood and Kepesh gives us, English majors all, the 
fake magic of poetry.10

Kepesh's acceptance of renunciation is certainly glossed
over by more than a few readers; there were those
critics who saw nothing but the same old "dirt" in
The Breast. Geoffrey Wagner's condemnation was total:
"Roth has a genius for making everything potentially
beautiful and joyful filthy and disgusting,"11 he goes
on to add that The Breast is perfectly pointless except
as a quick way of making a large sum of bread: which
it resoundingly has."12

Then there were those critics who were left
unimpressed by what John Gross termed the "existential
anguish" of the novella.

As for the notion that he has written a fable of
existential anguish or promethean fortitude,
nothing in the tone of the writing justifies such
lofty claims. The vision behind the book is clever,
aggressive, shallow, unremittingly (and unreward-
ingly) self-centered. Even the desperation and
baffled rage....are only perfunctorily conveyed.13

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10Mark Shechner, "Philip Roth," Partisan Review, 24
(No. 3, 1974), 421.

11Geoffrey Wagner, "Sublime to Sickening,"
National Review, 24 (November 1972), 1254.

12Ibid., p. 1254.

13John Gross, "Falsie," New Statesman, 85
(March 23, 1973), 430.
Equally unimpressed was Frederick Crews: "Discerning a psychological feast, we're handed an 'existential' crumb: Isn't it grand to endure the absurd?"¹⁴ Eliot Fremont-Smith would not even go this far, for "Kepesh's anguish is really not affecting, nor even, in any sustained way, very intriguing."¹⁵ Certainly, one cannot argue with another's power of empathy; however, as for Gross' evaluation, perhaps expecting a mid-twentieth century fantasy of transformation to approximate the same sort of tone achieved by, say, Shelley in *Prometheus Unbound* is a bit unrealistic. Furthermore, Crews' flippant "'existential' crumb" is in no way consonant with his initial and quite valid judgment of the novella as "a work of high seriousness....an oblique, cryptic statement about human dignity and resourcefulness."¹⁶

Crews' initial judgment is persuasively argued by Elizabeth Sabiston in a lengthy essay-review. In addition, she cleverly argues that like Roland Barthes


¹⁶Crews, p. 18.
in *Le Plaisir du texte*, Roth creates "a hybrid genre which partakes equally of the creative and critical visions."\(^17\) Of course, the "reverance" and "awe" which Barthes receives from American critics is denied their countryman even when Roth goes Barthes one better.

Most importantly, Roth and Barthes both remind us, in surprisingly similar metaphors of oral-sexual gratification, that the aim of art, and of criticism which itself is a form of literature, is to give pleasure in a holistic sense. Unlike Barthes, however, Roth does not simply assert that there are 'zones erogenes' in a literary text as in a human body—he actually shows them, and in the most vividly tactile manner. But American sociological-didactic critics, intent on labeling Roth as a 'Jewish novelist,' see only what their own preconceptions allow, and what they see is that Roth is willfully and hedonistically shocking the reader.\(^18\)

In this context, it should come as no surprise that Dr. Klinger must caution his patient: "So you will not be taken on your own terms, ever, you know--this you must realize beforehand." Indeed, it is not very difficult to perceive the authorial wistfulness behind the concerned analyst's words of warning. Just as Dr. Klinger cautions Kepesh about his predicament, for many people Philip Roth will ever remain "A joke. A grotesque. A charlatan. Of course."

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\(^{18}\) Ibid., p. 28.
Five years after the publication of *The Breast*, Roth found himself at an impasse. While once again returning to the bizarre predicament of David Kepesh, a sequel in which he suffered a series of "social humiliations" (a guest appearance on the Johnny Carson Show, no less!) seemed to serve "no interesting purpose."

Forced to shift his focus, Roth made the logical move: "The question I then put to myself was, 'Who is this fellow, anyway,'—or rather, who was he before he became a breast?" Only the meagerest of facts emerged from the novella: Kepesh is a Professor of comparative literature at Stony Brook, the product of an "upbringing in a typically crises-ridden Catskill hotel"; the high point of his adolescence is a series of sexual escapades with two Swedish girls in London while studying on a Fulbright Scholarship; a survivor of a Grand Guignol marriage and five years of psychoanalysis, at the time of his transformation he is engaged in an undemanding relationship with a "Pleasure-giving Claire."

The details that had formed the simple realistic underpinnings of a very surreal story seemed to me now to be begging to be brought to life, only this time on their own terms. At first this was still part of an attempt to flesh things out so that I could in time come back more knowingly to the sequel.

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But soon that concern dropped away. The result is a book that doesn't really bear a necessary relationship to The Breast. Each can live in the world without the other—and so, in that sense, The Professor of Desire is neither a sequel nor an antecedent. There are a number of motifs from the earlier book that I picked up and transformed in the later one, but doing that was a form of play....

Compelled to somehow define the relationship between the two works, Roth finally termed them "companion pieces." Furthermore, he went on to say that together with Portnoy's Complaint, the three books were "about what has been called 'the great and maddening' subject of desire. It's a large enough pie, I think, for me to have cut three pieces out of."  

It must be said that the novel breaks no new artistic or thematic ground; almost everything we hear is merely an elaboration of what we have heard before. For example, just as The Breast takes the form of a lecture, three-quarters of the way through the novel, Kepesh (composing his introductory lecture) reveals he is planning to teach a literature course--Desire 341. It is a course with a difference: his life will be the first text; he will disclose "the story of the

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21 Ibid., p. 52.
professor's desire" before he goes on to talk about Mishima and Genet, Madame Bovary and Anna Karenina. The Professor of Desire, therefore, comprises his opening series of lectures, all organized around the same lament articulated in The Breast: Why must desire die? At the end of the novel, Kepesh dares not articulate to Claire what she, in any case, knows already.

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 I must. Toward the flesh upon which I have been 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 of this life I love and have hardly gotten to know! And robbed by whom? It always comes down to myself! (p. 261)

Although this "piece of the pie" would seem to be nothing but a reserving of the stale crumbs left over from Portnoy's Complaint and The Breast, there are very genuine aesthetic satisfactions to be gained from the reading of The Professor of Desire.

The novel is an autobiographical case history of how David Kepesh comes to be locked into the limited

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consciousness which will be shattered with his transformation into a breast. Actually, a succession of David Kepeshes is paraded before the reader: The good little boy secure in "Family Paradise," while at the same time revering Herbie Bratasky, the master of scatological sound effects; the frivolous actor, a "lightweight and showoff" during his freshman year at Syracuse; the priapic philosopher/scholar who takes Byron's dictum "Studious by day....dissolute by night" as his personal motto; the Fulbright scholar, who not only fails his classes, but is nearly undone by his attempt to live the Byronic ideal; the sober graduate student, alienated from life and fascinated by an exotic woman; the devastated husband, incapable of ridding his neurotic wife of her obsession with a wealthy married lover of eight years standing; the "true" Kepesh, reconstituted by the love of Claire, yet in mortal fear of his inevitable loss of desire for her. Each of his last four "reincarnations" is dominated by his relationship with a woman. In each case, whether with the Swedish girls, Elisabeth and Brigitta, or Helen Baird or Claire Ovington, the same dynamic prevails. David Kepesh's curse is that he gets whomever it is he wants; eventually, desire fades, and years later he once again becomes temporarily obsessed with the woman.
David's true initiation into the realm of desire takes place in London. There he enters into a ménage à trois with the Swedish girls. Exhausting the sexual possibilities open to three people, they also exhaust the psychological resources of Elisabeth; she attempts suicide by walking in front of a truck. Fortunately, she only sustains a broken arm and concussion, and returns to Sweden for good. In a slough of despond, David tries to set the limits of personal responsibility in a series of letters to her.

And in the midst of composing these earnest apologies and petitions for pardon, I am overcome with the most unruly and contradictory emotions—a sense of unworthiness, of loathsomeness, of genuine shame and remorse, and simultaneously as strong a sense that I am not guilty of anything....And what about Brigitta, who was supposed to have been Elisabeth's protector....unmoved utterly—or so she pretends—by my drama of self-disgust? As though, since it was Elisabeth's arm, rather than neck, that was broken by the truck, she is entirely in the clear! As though Elisabeth's behavior with us is for Elisabeth's conscience alone to reckon with....and not hers....and not mine. But surely, surely, Brigitta is no less guilt than I am of misusing Elisabeth's pliable nature. Or is she? (pp. 34-35)

As a consequence of the guilt he feels for corrupting the innocent and vulnerable Elisabeth, David momentarily suffers from impotence with a whore. Nonetheless, all thoughts of crime and punishment (he thinks of himself as Raskolnikov) are soon banished in the willing embrace of Brigitta, "a girl who confronts the world with a
narrow foxy face." David is mesmerized by her "total immunity from remorse or self-doubt"; their sadomasochistic relationship finally goes beyond the pale for him when he realizes that, with a little push, he could easily end up her procurer. Frightened by the implications of his power over her, and by "what may actually be" his nature, he breaks off the relationship and flees for Stanford. The lesson he learns from this experience is valid to a point.

Following the year with Brigitta, I have come to realize that in order to achieve anything lasting, I am going to have to restrain a side of myself strongly susceptible to the most bewildering and debilitating sort of temptations, temptations that as long ago as that night outside Rousen I already recognized as inimicable to my overall interests. (pp. 51-52)

Unfortunately, by seizing upon literature as a refuge from the pain of awareness of his own "true" self (ironically, all the while proclaiming his dedication to its discovery), Kepesh begins the process which will conclude with his psychological and spiritual "blockage."

The next stage in the degenerative process is his relationship with Helen Baird. Helen is what the pulp magazines would term an "adventuress." At the age of eighteen, she follows a fabulously wealthy Englishman old enough to be her father to the Orient. She remains there for eight years as his lover until he threatens to kill his wife; this threat sends Helen scurrying
back to America and Stanford where she meets David at a party. Although a hopeless neurotic, Helen immediately sees what he has become: "a poor innocent theoretical bookworm....Everything about you is just a little bit of a lie--except your eyes." The only way David has of making sense of her experience is to compare (and in her eyes, reduce) it to works of literature: Anna Karenina, The Ambassadors, The Sun Also Rises. She correctly cautions him, "And perhaps you ought to lay off reading what all has been written....Dip a foot back into the stuff itself." Their relationship is not a dip, but an unwelcome immersion "into the stuff itself."

Their subsequent marriage is an abysmal failure since Helen's fixation on her old lover is never to be exorcized.

If only that past of hers weren't so vivid, so grandiose, so operatic--if somehow one or the other of us could forget it! If I could close this absurd gap of trust that exists between us still! Or ignore it! Live beyond it! (p. 68)

Every possibility occurs to him but the one which is necessary: David must learn to accept life, ambiguous warts and all. He is still very much the immature twenty year old, inauthentically setting out "to undo the contradictions and overleap the uncertainties."

The artistic success of the "Helen Baird Lecture" is due to the great insight with which Roth focuses on
the mechanisms by which one individual diminishes and restricts the consciousness of another.

By the time we are into our thirties we have so exacerbated our antipathies that each of us has been reduced to precisely what the other had been so leery of at the outset, the professorial 'smugness' and 'prissiness' for which Helen detests me with all her heart--'You've actually done it, David--you are a full-fledged young fogy'--no less in evidence than her 'utter mindlessness,' 'idiotic wastefulness,' 'adolescent dreaminess,' etc. (p. 71)

Helen finally reaches her breaking point; convinced her old lover will take her back, she flees to Hong Kong. Instead, he has her imprisoned on a phony narcotics charge. Although David flies out to "rescue" her, the relationship is irreparably broken. They divorce and he moves to New York.

There the combination of the "dogged demythologizing" of Dr. Klinger and the love of Claire Ovington nurses him back to psychological health. Although he feels he is being "sealed in something wonderful" with Claire, his confidence is unwarranted. He vacillates between two states: In one, he feels no need for More, Claire is finally Enough; in the other, tired of the angelic Claire who disdains oral sex, he longs for his "leud soul-mate," Brigitta. In an attempt to make sense of the "block" these contradictory emotions represent, he comes more and more to identify with "Kafka's preoccupation with the subject of spiritual starvation." the subject of a paper
he is to deliver at a seminar in Prague. In a discussion with a Czech intellectual who literally is living the life of a Joseph K., Kepesh adumbrates the following analogy:

"...I can only compare the body's utter single-mindedness, its cold indifference and absolute contempt for the well-being of the spirit, to some unyielding, authoritarian regime. And you can petition it all you like, offer up the most heartfelt and dignified and logical sort of appeal--and get no response at all. If anything, a kind of laugh is what you get. I submitted my petitions through a psychoanalyst; went to his office every other day for an hour to make my case for the restoration of a robust libido. And, I tell you, with arguments and perorations no less involuted and tedious and cunning and abstruse than the kind of thing you find in The Castle. You think poor K. is clever--you should have heard me trying to outfox impotence. (p. 172)

Nonetheless, in the aftermath of a visit to Kafka's grave, Kepesh finally feels his "obstructed days are over."
The last night in Czechoslovakia, he dreams he is visiting Kafka's now-eighty year old whore. She offers to allow him to examine her genitalia in the interests of literary research (and for a nominal fee):

But why not? Why come to the battered heart of Europe if not to examine just this? Why come into the world at all? 'Students of literature, you must conquer your squeamishness once and for all! You must face the unseemly thing itself! You must come off your high horse! There, there is your final exam.' (p. 191)

Of course, this petition from his unconscious will not be translated into action until there is no avoiding the issue; the transformation will take care of that.
Back in America, Claire and David rent a summer home in the country twenty miles from where David grew up. Two visits trigger the crisis of confidence with which the novel concludes. The first is from Helen, since remarried, but fixated as ever on her long lost love. Claire is threatened by her sudden appearance and, struck by the realization she will never make him happy, confesses to David that she secretly underwent an abortion. She also reveals what it is she wants of him: Marriage and a family, a commitment he fears.

The second visit is from his father and a friend, Mr. Barbatnik, a survivor of the holocaust. One evening, as David observes the beautiful Claire sitting between the two old men, he is overwhelmed by the tenuousness and ephemeral quality of life.

Only an interim, I think, and as though I have in fact been stabbed and the strength is gushing out of me. I feel myself about to tumble from my chair. Only an interim. Never to know anything durable. Nothing except my unrelinquishable memories of the discontinuous and the provisional; nothing except this ever-lengthening saga of all that did not work.... (pp. 251-52)

Although he attempts to conjure up "all the love he can muster" for her, the dread of a future in which their life together will cloy unmans him. In the midst of his terror, Mr. Barbatnik narrates the story of his survival in the concentration camps; the moral of the story will become painfully clear and applicable to the
transformed Kepesh.

There was a beginning....there has to be an ending. I am going to live to see this monstrosity come to an end. This is what I told myself every single morning and night. (p. 255)

Mr. Barbatnik's "lecture" not only foreshadows the courageous state of mind the transformed man will be forced to cultivate, but also defines the "true consciousness" which David will struggle to attain. His definition comes in answer to Claire's inquiry, "And before the war started....What did you want to be?"

A human being....someone that could see and understand how we lived, and what was real, and not to flatter myself with lies. This was always my ambition from when I was a small boy. In the beginning I was like everybody, a good cheder boy. But I personally, with my own hands, liberated myself from all that at sixteen years. My father could have killed me, but I absolutely did not want to be a fanatic. To believe in what doesn't exist, no, that wasn't for me. (p. 257)

The validity and import of his message is lost on David, paradoxically traumatized on one hand by a fear of permanence and commitment, and on the other by a fear of the ephemeral quality of existence. Nightmares bedevil him all that night. The conclusion of the novel is the last in a long series of forewarnings, blatant and veiled, of the horror yet to come.

Near dawn I awaken to discover that the house is not in ashes nor have I been abandoned in my bed as an incurable. My willing Clarissa is with me still! I raise her nightgown up along the length of her unconscious body, and with my lips begin to
press and tug her nipples until the pale, velvety, childlike areolae erupt in tiny granules and her moan begins. But even while I suck in a desperate frenzy at the choicest morsel of her flesh, even as I pit all my accumulated happiness, and all my hope, against my fear of transformations yet to come, I wait to hear the most dreadful sound imaginable emerge from the room where Mr. Barbatnik and my father lie alone and insensate, each in his freshly made bed. (pp. 262-63)

Although the genesis and development of Kepesh's deficiency of consciousness is Roth's paramount concern, there are two other subsidiary aspects of the novel which bear mentioning. David's idyllic childhood and continuing warm relationship with his parents is lovingly rendered in a gentle and touching manner. There is none of the bitter ambivalence shading into downright hatred which was so prevalent in Letting Go, Portnoy's Complaint, and When She Was Good. The rancor previously directed against the family is now transmuted and directed against academicians and literary critics (by no means a new addition to Roth's stock in trade, but raised to new heights in The Professor of Desire). Roth particularly vents his spleen in his depiction of David's friendship with an erotic poet, Ralph Baumgarten. Potshots are taken at literary morons who are incapable of comprehending the simple distinction between narrator and author, as well as those bone-dry academicians "who tell us that literature, in its most valuable and intriguing moments, is 'fundamentally non-referential.'" Although
the point is well taken, one measure of Kepesh's
deficiency of consciousness is the degree to which
literature becomes referential for him. Paradoxically,
while a means of making sense of reality, it also can
serve as a refuge against the pain of life. At the
conclusion of David's conversation with the Czech
intellectual (who is translating Melville's *Moby Dick*
in lieu of direct political action against the state),
precisely this misuse of literature is indicted.

'Well,' he says, putting a hand on my arm in
a kind and fatherly way, 'to each obstructed citizen
his own Kafka.'

'And to each angry man his own Melville,' I
reply. 'But then what are bookish people to do
with all the great prose they read--'

'-but sink their teeth into it. Exactly.
Into the books, instead of into the hand that
throttles them.' (p. 173)

None of the *Sturm und Drang* which usually
accompanied the appearance of a novel by Roth was present
with *The Professor of Desire*. Possibly the main reason
for the relative quiet which prevailed was the fact that
Kepesh simply was not as wildly neurotic a character as
Portnoy, nor was his predicament nearly as bizarre as it
is in *The Breast*. As a result, the extreme evaluations
(whether positive or negative) elicited by the previous
books were not in evidence; with lowered voices on both
sides, the critical reception was as modulated as the novel.
In a thoughtful essay-review, Robert Towers accurately focused on two troublesome weaknesses: Roth's inability to sustain what action there is, and his reduction of women to three archetypes - the Good Wasp (Claire, Sarah Maulsby), the Wanton (the monkey, Brigitta), and the Monster (Helen Baird, Maureen Tarnopol). Patricia Spacks was troubled as well by this reductivist tendency and complained, "Kepesh and his predecessors see women only as adjuncts." Nonetheless, Spacks shrewdly recognized that each protagonist's stunted relationship with women is clearly a function of his deficiency of consciousness:

Since the accounts of women in these first-person narratives issue from the protagonists, they may be understood as emphasizing the characters' terrible inability to escape the limits of their own imaginations....such characters flounder in incomplete perceptions, have trouble coming to terms with reality, feel angry at women for apparently needing to flounder less and for existing more comfortably with and in the real.

As for the complaint (quite often leveled at Roth in general) that perspective, distance, and irony are non-existent in the novel, Vance Bourjaily persuasively

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25 Ibid., p. 375.
argued that indeed they are. As Bourjaily pointed out, this flaw seems to be most pronounced at the end of the novel when Kepesh rages against the inevitability of his loss of desire, "as if it were a black misfortune and his alone."26 Perspective is maintained in spite of its seeming disappearance.

But perhaps yet another classic device, that of literary allusion, is on the author's side in place of irony, as it often is throughout the book. For Kepesh compares his rage to that of Gogol's Kovalyov, a madman who loses his nose. See Kepesh as unhinged on the subject of his lost passion, and the problem of irony disappears.27

The lack of recognition of this and other distancing techniques leads to many difficulties for some of Roth's readers. For example, as Pearl K. Bell noted, Kepesh's whining ("Oh, it's stupid! Idiotic! Unfair!") is indeed "infantile, not reflective."28 It is the remainder of her argument which does not hold up: "It adds nothing to our understanding of the warring souls in Kepesh, for Roth seems to believe that the only choices

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27 Ibid.; p. 50.
28 Pearl K. Bell, "Philip Roth: Sonny Boy or Lenny Bruce?" Commentary, November 1977, 63.
available to a grown Jewish man are Al Jolson's sonny boy or Lenny Bruce."\textsuperscript{29} A despairing Kepesh might conceivably ascribe to this reductivism, but Roth himself? Not likely--the lesson finally learned in \textit{The Breast} shimmers like an elusive and ghostly grail throughout the pages of this companion piece: "You must change your life."

\textsuperscript{29}Pearl K. Bell, "Philip Roth: Sonny Boy or Lenny Bruce?" \textit{Commentary}, November 1977, 63.
CHAPTER VI

STAGE FOUR: MY LIFE AS A MAN

David Kepesh's acceptance of the complexity and ambiguity inherent in the human condition and his spreading of Rilke's gospel together demonstrated his breakthrough to the true consciousness of the "open decision." Thus concluded the agonizing growth of consciousness initiated a decade prior in the person of Gabe Wallach. Incapable of living the human condition as it is given, Wallach fled to Europe in the attempt not only to avoid the distressing consequences of his choices, but the pain of awareness as well. In another withdrawal from the "real world," Peter Tarnopol, the central character and putative author of My Life As A Man, takes refuge in the Quahsay Colony,

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1Philip Roth, My Life As A Man (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974). Parenthetical numbers in the text and footnotes are page references to this edition of the novel.
a sanctuary for fragile artists in the wilds of Vermont.

As Roth has pointed out, the motivation for Tarnopol's seclusion is diametrically opposite to that of Wallach's:

But for Tarnopol the presentation or description of himself is what is most problematical—and what remains unresolved. To my mind, Tarnopol's attempt to realize himself with the right words—as earlier in life he attempted realizing himself through the right deeds—is what's at the heart of the book, and accounts for my joining his fictions about his life with his autobiography. When the novel is considered in its entirety, I hope it will be understood as Tarnopol's struggle to achieve a description.2

Tarnopol's description takes the form of two short stories, "Salad Days" and "Courting Disaster (or, Serious in the Fifties)" in Part I of the novel, titled "Useful Fictions"; Part II, "My True Story," is Tarnopol's autobiographical attempt to exorcize a particularly nasty personal demon—his obsession with the memory of his late wife, Maureen, an obsession impervious to the combined forces of psychoanalysis and fiction. The "unresolved" upshot of Tarnopol's dual effort is a reflexive novel (that is, one in which the narrator himself is a writer producing his own fictions); as such, it brilliantly reflects in its very structure the acceptance of ambiguity which is the heart of the "open decision."

2 Roth, On My Life As A Man," RMO, pp. 96-97.
My Life As A Man challenges the careful reader with a complex and bewildering set of circumstances. Momentarily putting aside the overview already delineated, how is the uninstructed reader likely to experience the novel? First and foremost, the work is, of course, written by Philip Roth, noted—and some would say infamous—novelist and professor of literature. Although a note to the reader makes clear that the "Useful Fictions" which open My Life As A Man "are drawn from the writings of Peter Tarnopol," they are ostensibly written by a Nathan Zuckerman, also a novelist and professor of literature. The first is narrated from a self-professed "amused Olympian point of view" until its concluding two paragraphs, in which an unnamed "author" (Zuckerman? Tarnopol? Roth?) comments on the implications of the story for its hero—Nathan Zuckerman—and his own artistic difficulties in continuing with Zuckerman's story as he takes leave of his "easeful salad days." The second short story is seemingly Zuckerman's autobiographical first person narration of what was characterized in the first story as "the misfortunes of Zuckerman's twenties." Part II, "My True Story," opens with a brief curriculum vitae cum intimate sketch of Peter Tarnopol, also a novelist and professor of literature. (Curiously enough, the facts of his history
are more than vaguely familiar; in fact, they seem to parallel quite a few vital details of both Nathan Zuckerman's and Philip Roth's literary and personal careers!) Tarnopol's sketch concludes with the admission that both psychotherapy and the practice of fiction have proven unsuccessful in exorcizing "once and for all" his obsession with his late wife, Maureen. With grave misgivings, he proposes autobiography as a means "to demystify the past and mitigate his admittedly uncommendable sense of defeat."

To these three "versions" or "legends" of Peter Tarnopol are added a host of others from the following sources in "My True Story": actual critical responses to his fiction (and inevitably to him) from his brother, sister, psychiatrist, and an editor of a fiction review and his wife; imaginary reviews from an ex-student/mistress, Karen Oakes, and from the dead Maureen; his psychiatrist's rendering in a professional article titled "Creativity: The Narcissism of the Artist"; Maureen's version in a punitive short story titled "Dressing Up In Mommy's Clothes"; finally, the construct which is appropriated by Maureen's psychotherapy group, especially its spokeswoman, Flossie.

What emerges from this group portrait of Peter Tarnopol is a highly ambiguous collage: Each separate
element is more or less out of focus, possibly true in its broad outlines, yet too indeterminate in its particulars to be accurate. In response to an imaginary essay by Karen Oakes on the "Useful Fictions," Tarnopol extends the ironies and ambiguities which are engendered by this "unresolved" portrait to their nth degree: "Though frankly....Tarnopol, as he is called, is beginning to seem as imaginary as my Zuckerman's anyway, or at least as detached from the memoirist--his revelations coming to seem like still another 'useful fiction.'" It is difficult to conceive of a more "unresolved" and ambivalent conclusion for Tarnopol's "struggle to achieve a description."

Before I go on to consider the critical issues and implications of this relativistic perspective (and in the interests of clarity and coherence), a detailed synopsis of the Zuckerman and Tarnopol stories is in order.

"Salad Days" opens with one of those dire prophecies which always comes true in classical and Shakespearean tragedy: "Keep up that cockiness with people, Natie, and you'll wind up a hermit, a hated person, the enemy of the world." Spoken by Nathan's "Polonius" of a shoesalesman father, these cautionary words reverberate menacingly through the unblemished
chronical of success of his son's "easeful salad days."
Dale Carnegie does little to mitigate Nathan's growing arrogance, as does the ridiculous ease with which he successfully navigates the treacheries of adolescence. For seventeen years, his "puppyish, protected upbringing" is filled with "family life and love such as he imagined everyone enjoyed, more or less." The only disappointment Nathan suffers is in the failures of another: His mentor brother, Sherman, leaves unfulfilled the exotic promise of a career as a jazz musician, and becomes, of all things, an orthodontist! The only intimation of future failure from Nathan's childhood is transformed by him into a testament to his own moral superiority.

He had in fact been pretty fearless on the football field, so long as everybody played according to the rules and within the spirit of the game. But when (to his surprise) that era of good fellowship came to an end, Wiry Nate Zuckerman retired. (pp. 19-20)

The era ends when an Irish kid piles onto Nathan screaming "Cream that Yid!"

Henceforth football was no longer to be a game played by the rules, but a battle in which each of the combatants would try to get away with as much as he could, for whatever 'reasons' he had. And Zuckerman could get away with nothing—he could not even hit back when attacked. He could use what strength he had to try to restrain somebody else from going at him, he would struggle like hell to prevent damage or disfigurement to himself, but when it came to bringing his own knuckles or knees into violent contact with another, he just could not make it happen. (p. 20)
Although seemingly a minor incident, it clearly foreshadows Nathan's future inability to cope successfully with "reality." His withdrawal from the sport is reminiscent of a great many withdrawals in Roth's fiction, and if his protagonists learn nothing else, they learn that the game is rarely played according to the rules.

Nathan's sense of superiority flourishes at Bass College; he eventually de-pledges the "topdrawer Jewish fraternity," quits ROTC on principle, and comes to think of himself as "the H.L. Mencken of Bass College" and a lacerating editorialist of Swiftian proportions. He also becomes "the chosen of the Chosen"--the Jewish intellectual elite. As the chief disciple of Miss Caroline Benson, the barbarian is properly civilized. From her he not only learns "There are no 'guys,' Mr. Zuckerman, in _Pride and Prejudice_," and how to pronounce the g in 'length,' but that his sense of superiority is altogether justified. His rationale for joining a fraternity, "I think I should learn to get along better with people," is coolly rejected by her.

Miss Benson's response to his proposed scheme for self-improvement was at once so profound and so simply put that Zuckerman went around for days repeating the simple interrogative sentence to himself; like _Of Time and the River_, it verified something he had known in his bones all along, but in which he could not place his faith until it had been articulated by someone of indisputable moral prestige and purity: 'Why,' Caroline Benson asked
the seventeen-year-old boy, 'should you want to learn a thing like that?' (pp. 16-17)

While Miss Benson takes full charge of Nathan's intellectual development, his sexual education proceeds apace with the lascivious Sharon Shatsky, long-suffering daughter of "Al 'The Zipper King' Shatsky." The major trauma of her life is her father's refusal to anglize their name to Shadley; in adolescent revolt against his stubbornness, she willingly gives herself up to any and every sexual excess which the imaginative Nathan can come up with. In spite of Sharon's slavish enactment of even his most bizarre desires (she does for zucchini what the inimitable Portnoy earlier had done for liver!), Nathan soon tires of her, and is actually relieved to be drafted upon graduation.

Coarse, childish, ignorant, utterly lacking in that exquisiteness of feeling and refinement of spirit that he had come to admire so in the novels—in the person—of Virginia Woolf, whose photograph had been tacked above his desk during his last semester at Bass....she was a tantalizing slave and an extraordinary lay, but hardly a soul mate for someone who felt as he did about great authors and great books. (p. 28)

With "his last big dose....of beginner's luck"—a clerical error—instead of being shipped out to Korea after MP school, he turns up a clerk-typist under the command of a sadistic and bigoted Southerner. Captain Clark's peculiar pleasure in life is to bounce cotton golf balls off of his Jewish flunky.
His human rights! His religion! Oh, each time a
golf ball caromed softly off his flesh, how he
seethed with indignation... which isn't (as Private
Zuckerman well knew), the same as running with blood.
Nor is it what is meant in literature, or even in
life for that matter, by suffering and pain. (p. 30)

Although temporarily safe, the "young conquistador" will
soon become on the closest, if not the best, of terms with
suffering and pain.

He would begin to pay.... for the vanity and the
ignorance, to be sure, but above all for the contra­
dictions: 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. (pp. 30-31)

With minor differences we have met this character time
and again: Gabe Wallach, Alexander Portnoy, David Kepesh--
all are subject as well to the "contradictions" which
plague Nathan Zuckerman.

After this authorial prophecy (reinforcing the
parental one with which the short story opened), the
concluding paragraph focuses on the narrative and personal
difficulties facing the "author."

To narrate with fidelity the misfortunes of
Zuckerman's twenties would require deeper dredging,
a darker sense of irony, a grave and pensive voice
to replace the amused, Olympian point of view....
or maybe what the story requires is neither gravity
nor complexity, but just another author, someone
who would see it too for the simple five-thousand-
word comedy that it very well may have been.
Unfortunately, the author of this story, having
himself experienced a similar misfortune at about
the same age, does not have it in him, even yet,
midway through his thirties, to tell it briefly or to find it funny. 'Unfortunate' because he wonders if that isn't more the measure of the man than of the misfortune. (p. 31)

These admissions introduce what will become the central concern of the novel: What is important is not really the "man" on one hand, nor the narrative on the other. The focus of *My Life As a Man* will be on the difficulties in translating "raw material" into art: In short, the novel is fiction which has as its primary subject matter the creation of fiction. ³

One way of approaching "Courting Disaster" is to recognize that its relationship to "Salad Days" will be recapitulated later on in the relationship of "My True Story" to the "Useful Fictions." First comes the fictional construct, followed by the purported "reality," the "true story" from which it is drawn. The Nathan Zuckerman who is the first person narrator of "Courting Disaster" is not identical to the Nathan Zuckerman of "Salad Days." Minor biographical details are changed (to protect the innocent?), yet Zuckerman #1 is as clearly the alter ego of Zuckerman #2 as the two of them are alter egos of Peter Tarnopol.

Although one father is a shoesalesman while the

³Pinsker notes: "reflexivity meant....'fiction' per se became a running account of its own creation." (p. 103)
other is a bookkeeper, the critical effect they have on
their sons is quite similar. The shoesalesman's
insistence that Natie sign his name right "in part....
may even account for what goads him to be a 'writer:'"
The bookkeeper inadvertently feeds his sickly son's
developing imagination by posing arithmetical problems
to him.

'Marking Down,' he would say, not unlike a recitation
student announcing the title of a poem. 'A clothing
dealer, trying to dispose of an overcoat cut in
last year's style, marked it down from its original
price of thirty dollars to twenty-four. Failing to
make a sale, he reduced the price still further to
nineteen dollars and twenty cents. Again he found
no takers, so he tried another price reduction and
this time sold it....All right, Nathan; what was
the selling price, if the last markdown was consistent
with the others?' (p. 36)

To his father's dismay, Nathan is "intrigued by fantastic
and irrelevant details of geography and personality and
intention instead of the simple beauty of the arithmetical
solution. He did not think that was intelligent of me,
and he was right." Just as Sherman deeply disillusioned
Nathan by rejecting jazz artistry and bohemia for
orthodontia and marriage to a flat-chested dental
technician, Sonia, the older sibling in "Courting
Disaster," disappoints her younger brother. Sonia, the
Lily Pons of the neighborhood, also turns her back on
her musical ability only to marry a succession of ne'er-
do-well Italians of "repellent background."
Of course, there are several significant differences in the two stories. Reflecting the "darker sense of irony" which informs "C.D.," the cocky Wiry Nate Zuckerman of "Salad Days" gives way to a youth who "underwent daily schoolyard humiliation....because of....physical timidity and hopelessness at all sports." This perhaps sheds another kind of light on the alacrity with which Wiry Nate retires from football. Similarly, the Sharon Shatsky of "Salad Days" is anything but "course, childish, ignorant," in "Courting Disaster." Minor differences are the colleges the two attend--Bass and Rutgers--and where they end up after MP school--Kentucky and Georgia.

Although interesting for the insight they give into the manipulation of what Roth terms the "hooks" of reality within a fiction, the individual parallels and distinctions are but the preamble to the major concern of "Courting Disaster": The form of Nathan Zuckerman's payment for his "contradictions"--entrapment in a disastrous marriage.

Lydia Ketterer is the woman against whom Zuckerman breaks himself. Her life history is dismal saga of brutality and degradation: raped by her father as a child, handmaid to a hypochondriacal mother and two spinster aunts, divorced from a brute who regularly beat
her, and survivor of a horrific "'flirtation' with madness," Lydia is a totally alien creature for the innocent Nathan. The extent of this callow academic's worldliness before she enters his life is laughable.

Owning my own 'library' was my only materialistic ambition; in fact, trying to decide which two of these thousands of books to buy that week, I would frequently get so excited that by the time the purchase was accomplished I had to make use of the bookseller's toilet facilities. I don't believe that either microbe or laxative has ever affected me so strongly as the discovery that I was all at once the owner of a slightly soiled copy of Empson's Seven Types of Ambiguity in the original English edition. (p. 49)

Lydia is Nathan's student in a creative writing course he teaches for the University of Chicago. In spite of the fact that he finds her physically repulsive, Nathan is drawn inexorably to her "because she had suffered so and because she was so brave. Not only that she had survived, but what she had survived, gave her enormous moral stature, or glamour, in my eyes." Even the way she tells her story fascinates him.

Lydia's easy, familiar, even cozy manner with misery, her droll acceptance of her own madness, greatly increased the story's appeal—or, to put it another way, did much to calm whatever fears one might expect an inexperienced young man of a conventional background to have about a woman bearing such a ravaged past....No, no, this was someone who had experienced her experience, who had been deepened by all the misery. A decidedly ordinary looking person, a pretty little American blonde with a face like a million others, she had, without benefit of books or teachers, mobilized every ounce of her intelligence to produce a kind of wisdom about herself. (p. 46)
What ultimately proves to cement the relationship is not only the "moral triumph" this represents for Nathan, but that she "lives to write the tale, and to write it for me."

They live together for eighteen months are are married for four years; predictably, the marriage is a fiasco, for Lydia is tormented not only by her physical defects, but, haunted by the memory of her own rape, she becomes obsessed with the idea that Nathan will violate her daughter, Monica. Moonie, as she is called, is an abysmally ignorant child, and it falls to Nathan to educate her in even the most elementary matters. As a consequence, what Lydia fears most comes to pass: Although he honors the "incest taboo," Nathan comes to love and desire Moonie more than he does her mother. This peripeteia is more than Lydia can bear; she finally ends her misery by slashing her wrists with a can opener. Shortly after her suicide, Nathan and the sixteen year old Moonie become lovers and flee to Italy. Why? "But how ever could we be lovers together in Hyde Park?"

At the time Zuckerman is supposedly writing the memoir/confession the two of them have lived abroad for eight years, and "to our Italian friends we are simply another American writer and his pretty young girlfriend." Nathan is able "to control the remorse and shame" he
feels so long as no one knows his true relation to Moonie.

However, to stifle the sense I have that I am living someone else's life is beyond me. I was supposed to be elsewhere and otherwise. This is not the life I worked and planned for! Was made for! (p. 84)

Indeed, to his abiding regret, the game has not been played according to the rules. The confession is largely Zuckerman's attempt to discover what it is in him that doomed him to so ignoble an end.

First and foremost is that full-blown arrogance which was so devastatingly depicted in "Salad Days."

Nathan's unwarranted confidence that he can deal with any eventuality certainly sets him up for his hard fall.

Why did people fail?....Why would anyone prefer the ignobility of defeat to the genuine pleasures of achievement? Especially as the latter was so easy to effectuate: All you had to be was attentive, methodical, thorough, punctual, and persevering; all you had to be was orderly, patient, self-disciplined, undiscourageable, and industrious--and, of course, intelligent. And that was it. What could be simpler? (p. 47)

Growing out of this smug self-assurance (and the focus of "Courting Disaster") is the high seriousness with which Nathan views his life. For example, he breaks off his relationship with Sharon Shatsky, "a tall, handsome auburn-haired girl, studious, enthusiastic, and lively, an honor student in literature," because she does not "speak to the range of my ambitions." It is a woman the
young Zuckerman craves, not a girl—Lydia Ketterer, exotic background and all, certainly fills that bill. Sharon's final accusation accurately punctures the pretensions of the high priest of a still higher seriousness: "Oh, Nathan, ... underneath all that scrupulousness and fairness and reasonableness, you're a madman! Sometimes I think that underneath all that 'maturity' you're just a crazy little boy." Part and parcel of this "seriousness" is Nathan's unfortunate penchant for interpreting life solely in literary terms. A few telling examples: He considers his sister in Purgatorio, Lydia in Hell; he cannot comprehend the story of Lydia's incest because it lacks "the messengers and choruses and oracles" of classical drama; he recognizes in the stories of Isaac Babel's "experience as a bespectacled Jew with the Red cavalry something like a highly charged version of what I had experienced during my brief tour of duty as an MP"; in exile in Italy with Moonie he compares them unfavorable to Vronsky and Anna Karenina and is disappointed he is not "so bewildered and disabled as was Aschenbach because of his passion for Tadzio"; he is too humiliated to either leave Moonie or return with her to America:

A reader of Conrad's Lord Jim and Mauriac's Therese and Kafka's "Letter to His Father," of Hawthorne
and Strindberg and Sophocles--of Freud!--and still I did not know that humiliation could do such a job on a man. It seems either that literature too strongly influences my ideas about life, or that I am able to make no connection at all between its wisdom and my existence. (p. 86)

Ignored is the lesson learned years earlier while suffering with migraines in the army:

....I could not resist reflecting upon my migraines in the same supramedical way that I might consider the illnesses of Milly Theale or Hans Castorp or the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, or ruminate upon the transformation of Gregor Samsa into a cockroach, or search out the 'meaning' in Gogol's short story of Collegiate Assessor Kovalev's temporary loss of his nose. Whereas an ordinary man might complain, 'I get these damn headaches' (and have been content to leave it at that), I tended, like a student of high literature or a savage who paints his body blue, to see the migraines as standing for something, as a disclosure or 'epiphany,' isolated or accidental or inexplicable only to one who was blind to the design of a life or a book. What did my migraines signify? (p. 55)

Only after visiting a neurologist (who "demystifies" his malady as thoroughly as does Dr. Klinger the transformation for David Kepesh), does Zuckerman finally consider himself "living tissue subject to the pathology of the species, rather than a character in a novel whose disease the reader may be encouraged to diagnose by way of moral, psychological, or metaphysical hypotheses."

It is an insight he must continually struggle to retain; more often than not, it is forgotten or repressed or simply ignored. Such as the qualities--the arrogance, high seriousness, and predilection to misapply the tools
of art to life—which make a self-professed "soap opera" of Nathan Zuckerman's existence. And soap opera is absolutely the last dramatic form with which he would choose to characterize and "interpret" his life.

Peter Tarnopol's autobiographical narrative, "My True Story," definitely belongs to the province of soap opera as well. Furthermore, he himself is the origin of the very deficiencies just enumerated in his two alter egos, the Zuckerman boys. This is not surprising, considering the intention with which the "Useful Fictions" are written. Tarnopol's "story" opens with the admission that art has not fulfilled a therapeutic function for him; he has tested the Lawrentian doctrine that "One sheds one's sicknesses in books, repeats and presents again one's emotions to be made master of them" and found it wanting. Repeated attempts to "penetrate that mystery" of "the Subject"—his traumatic marriage to Maureen Johnson Tarnopol—all end in frustration. The obsession will not yield, and Tarnopol can only lament: "obsessed, I was as incapable of not writing about what was killing me as I was of

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4 Quoted by Mark Schorer, "Technique As Discovery," The Theory of The Novel, ed., Philip Stevick (New York: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1967), p. 73. The failure of this effort would come as no surprise to Schorer: "For merely to repeat one's emotions, merely to look into one's heart and write, is also merely to repeat the round of emotional bondage."
altering or understanding it." Pathetically and ironically true, then, is the novel's epigraph taken from the diary of his late wife: "I could be his Muse, if only he'd let me."

Tarnopol meets his "Muse" in 1958. At the time, he is a struggling young writer working on his first novel; his master is not "Mammon or Fun or Propriety, but Art, and Art of the earnest moral variety." Maureen, like her fictional counterpart, Lydia Ketterer, is a "rough customer," whose "daredevil background had a decidedly exotic and romantic appeal" for they native tyro. A runaway at the age of sixteen, twice divorced—first from a "brute" who beats and sexually abuses her, then from a pretty-boy actor who turns out to be homosexual—Maureen fulfills the chief requirement Tarnopol establishes for his relationships: "What I liked, you see, was something taxing in my love affairs, something problematical and puzzling to keep the imagination going even while I was away from my books." For this reason, he cuts off an affair with Dina Dornbusch, the model for the Sharon Shatsky of "Courting Disaster." She is beautiful and accomplished and sexually vibrant; Dina's main fault is that she is "still in college writing papers on 'the technical perfection' of 'Lycidas,'" while at twenty-five Tarnopol really wants "something called a
'woman.'"

From the very start their relationship is a living hell; jealous of Peter's devotion to his Art, a compulsive liar (Tarnopol muses that perhaps this was "her art of fiction, 'creativity' gone awry"), and bearing a deep-seated hatred of men in general, Maureen certainly complies with Peter's desire for a taxing woman. At one point, it occurs to him to "take flight"; this, of course, is inconceivable for a reason quite obvious to any reader of the "Useful Fictions": "having never before been defeated in my life in anything that mattered, I simply could not recognize defeat as a possibility for me...." And just as his fictional counterparts find inconceivable the possibility of the "game" being played outside of the rules, it is only after three lacerating years of marriage that Peter discovers the subterfuge with which Maureen tricks him into marrying. For two dollars and twenty-five cents, she buys a urine specimen from a pregnant woman and represents it as her own at a pharmacy. When Peter establishes the positive result, he decides to do the only "moral," "manly" thing: He will propose to Maureen, pretending he does not even know the diagnosis.

Yes, it was indeed one of those grim and unyielding predicaments such as I had read about in fiction, such as Thomas Mann might have had in mind when he wrote in an autobiographical sketch the sentence
that I had already chosen as one of the two
portentous epigraphs for A Jewish Father: 'All
actuality is deadly earnest, and it is morality
itself that, one with life, forbids us to be true
to the guileless unrealism of our youth.'

He makes his "moral decision," and with the advantage of
years and hindsight, adumbrates the by now familiar
factors which determined his choice.

My trouble in my middle twenties was that rich with
confidence and success, I was not about to settle
for complexity and depth in books alone. Stuffed
to the gills with great fiction—entranced not by
cheap romances, like Madame Bovary, but by Madame
Bovary—I now expected to find in everyday experience
the same sense of the difficult and the deadly
earnest that informed the novels I admired most.
My model of reality, deduced from reading the masters,
had at its heart intractability. And here it was,
a reality as obdurate and recalcitrant and (in
addition) as awful as any I could have wished for
in my most bookish dreams....Want complexity?
Difficulty? Intractability? Want the deadly
earnest? Yours! (p. 194)

Yes! But the intractability he is to experience is not
that of The Brothers Karamozov, but of Days of Our Lives.

The confession which comes three years later
completes the process of dissolution which Maureen
triggers: Erased is "all pretense of being an 'inte-
grated' personality." While in New York City as a
participant in a writing workshop, for the first time in

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5This, of course, is the epigraph to Roth's first
novel, Letting Go. As Charles Newman suggests, My Life
As a Man "is a gloss and commentary on Roth's own work."
("The Failure of the Therapeutic," Harpers, July 1974,
p. 88.)
his life, Peter contemplates suicide. Prompted by his supportive brother, Moe, he finally finds the strength to leave Maureen (who is back in Madison where Peter teaches at the University of Wisconsin). In the attempt to put his life in order, Peter accepts a position at Hofstra College, enters into psychotherapy with a Dr. Otto Spielvogel, and is legally separated from Maureen.

The next year, he meets Susan Seabury McCall, a wealthy, young widow, who "in temperament and social bearing... was as unlike Maureen as a woman can be." Maybe so, but once again Peter is attracted to a piece of "broken china." Suffering acutely from an unresolved Electra complex, and with a terrifying Clytemnestra of a mother, Susan's history is replete with mental breakdowns. Her poignant admission, "I haven't been a person since I was sweet sixteen. I'm just symptoms. A collection of symptoms, instead of a human being," sounds an irresistible siren song for her maladroit paramour. Peter ignores his brother's warning, "Another fucked-up shiksa. First the lumpenproletariat, now the aristocracy," and enters into a five year relationship of "mutual education and convalescence."

Badly scarred in Marital War I, Peter is relieved that marriage to Susan is impossible as long as Maureen refuses to divorce; on the other hand, bled dry by alimony,
what he most desires is for her to finally divorce him. Suddenly and incredibly, the issue becomes a moot point with the death of Maureen in a car accident. Freed at last from a woman who threatened to kill herself if he would not marry her, Peter breaks off with Susan due to "deep misgivings about winding up imprisoned once again." He secretly leaves for the Quahsay Colony, and for six weeks does not hear from Susan; then the news comes which he so fears: The threat Maureen only made is unsuccessfully carried out by Susan. He rushes back to New York City, and is greeted with the chilling yet predictable words, "I love you, that's why I did it."

So much for the synopses of the "Useful Fictions" and "My True Story." On to the central problem: What are the critical issues raised by this reflexive novel, and how does it fit into the context of the "open decision?"

Earlier in the chapter, I noted Tarnopol's concession that his own revelations "seem like still another 'useful fiction,' and not because I am telling lies. I am trying to keep to the facts." He goes on to posit two possible causes for this disturbing predicament; although by now a commonplace, the first

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6Newman notes: "The theme of language as prison is central to our decade." (p. 88)
particularly bears discussion: "Maybe all I'm saying is that words, being words, only approximate the real thing, and so no matter how close I come, I only come close." The implications of this analysis are quite evident: If true (and common sense and the argument of the novel would certainly hold that it is), this means that Tarnopol's attempt at "objectivity" is doomed before it begins. On one hand, words are quite slippery—connotations and associations peculiar to the individual often do not facilitate even an approximation of the "real thing." On the other hand, words simply cannot encompass reality, especially when reality by its very nature is ambiguous and paradoxical. This is precisely the point of the equivocation which marks Nathan Zuckerman's attempt to describe his reality at the conclusion of "Courting Disaster."

Ketterer came to hate me, Monica to fall in love with me, and Lydia to accept me at last as her means of salvation. She saw the way out of her life's misery, and I, in the service of Perversity or Chivalry or Morality or Misogyny or Saintliness or Folly or Pent-up Rage or Psychic Illness or Sheer Lunacy or Innocence or Ignorance or Experience or Heroism or Judaism or Masochism or Self-Hatred or Defiance or Soap Opera or Romantic Opera or the Art of Fiction, or none of the above, or maybe all of the above and more—-I found the way into mine. (p. 95)

It is no accident that this should become a critical, if not the central, issue in My Life As A Man.
In a recent article appearing in *College English*, David Henry Lowenkron carefully examines the subgenre of the reflexive novel while situating it firmly in a relativistic context which is "necessary to capture an illusive reality." In so doing, he not only performs an extremely valuable taxonomic function, but makes a series of cogent observations germane to my discussion of *My Life As a Man*. To begin with, what I have called a reflexive novel, Lowenkron (developing an analogy based on semantics and recent studies in fiction and drama) terms a metanovel. His generic definition of the form precisely describes the specific structure of *My Life As a Man*.

A metanovel is a work in which an inner fiction, narrated by an inner persona, is intercalated in an outer one. The inner novelist perceives while he is perceived, creates while he is created, and has free will while he is determined. The epistemological innovation implied by this technical intrusion of an inner fiction is that the central conflict between fiction and reality is reproduced within the structure of the novel itself. The author does this by showing how the inner novelist attempts to write about putative reality—in this case, the outer novel.

Implicit in this definition is the assumption that the metanovel "is both a form and a way of viewing reality

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8 Ibid., p. 343.
that is indigenous to, at least, a select group of twentieth century authors" (among the specific works he cites are Andre Gide's *The Counterfeiters*, Aldous Huxley's *Point Counter Point*, Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, and *My Life As a Man*). Lowenkron goes on to locate the metanovel "in the intersection between the novel, which deals with people, manners, and personal relationships, and the critical essay which surveys the architecture of the novel." 10 The critical, reflexive aspect of the metanovel he terms the "autocritique."

By this, I mean the tendency of the metanovelist to criticize his own novel within that very novel. This involves the absorption of the critical process within the creative work of art and underscores the knowledge and sophistication of twentieth century authors about the techniques of novel construction.... To some extent, the autocritique also represents an attempt on the part of the metanovelist to have his cake and eat it: To be both critic and novelist. Thus he jumps the gun on the critic, destroying the critic's function by adopting it himself and vitiating the power of the critic to criticize something that the author himself had freely admitted in his autocritique. In this manner, the frightened author wreaks vengeance upon a presumably hostile critic. The most persistant autocritique I know of occurs in Philip Roth's *My Life As a Man*, where the author critiques two fictions by the micro-novelist, Peter Tarnopol, from several perspectives. 11

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10 Ibid., p. 344.

11 Ibid., p. 354.
Although Lowenkron's characterization of the author as "frightened" is arguable (perhaps "scornful" is a much more accurate adjective, especially in Roth's case), and while much is "freely admitted" in *My Life As a Man*, Roth certainly does take a perverse pride in "jumping the gun" on his critics (for example, when questioned on the meaning of *The Breast*, he fairly crowed: "Not all the ingenuity of all the English teachers in all the English departments in America can put David Kepesh together again"). Nonetheless, the myriad points of view, the "perspectives," are artistically necessary for the "unresolved description" of what Lowenkron terms "an illusive reality." As a consequence, much of the novel takes the form of arrested dialectic: A thesis accounting for the

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12 Roth, "On The Breast," RMO, p. 69. Michael Wood's complaint, "there is nothing I can say here that Roth doesn't know himself, indeed hasn't said himself in one form or another in this novel," reflects the success Roth has in usurping the critic's function. ("Hooked," *The New York Review of Books*, June 13, 1974, p. 8.)

13 Saul Maloff correctly focuses on the dialectical aspect of the novel; less than convincing is his conclusion that "Tarnopol is a sonofabitch and often seems at the threshold of discovering the transparent truth just before closing the door on it, and that Roth, cannier by far than the rest of us, knows it perfectly well." ("The Golden Boy as Heel," *The New Republic*, June 8, 1974, p. 22.)
reality of Peter Tarnopol is hypothesized, Tarnopol's antithesis is hotly argued, but a synthesis never emerges. This is not a weakness, but precisely the point and the strategy of the novel. 14

As for the autocritique's concern with the "architecture of the novel," Roth's treatment breaks down into two broad categories. In the first belong those conventional observations on fiction one might expect of a college instructor: "You just cannot deliver up fantasies and call that 'fiction.' Ground your stories in what you know. Stick to that." In the second category fall those observations growing out of, and in response to, specific critical charges leveled against Roth. This defense is most developed in "Dr. Spielvogel," the chapter dealing with the tumultuous relationship between Tarnopol and his analyst. Spielvogel's "useful fiction" appears in an article titled "Creativity: The Narcissism of the Artist," in which he argues that Peter Tarnopol's narcissism has at its root a "castration anxiety vis-a-vis a phallic mother figure."

14 David Monaghan's assessment of the novel as flawed, because "in trying to suggest the complexity of "knowing" a person, Roth presents Tarnopol from so many perspectives that, in the end, we find we know nothing at all about him," is representative of the confusion which the novel engendered. In "The Great American Novel and My Life As a Man" An Assessment of Philip Roth's Achievement," International Fiction Review, 2 (1975), 33.
Tarnopol is enraged not only by this psychoanalytic reductivism, but also by Spielvogel's inept masking of his identity: He is given the protective coloration of a "successful Italian-American poet in his forties."

And while we're at it, Dr. Spielvogel, a poet and a novelist have about as much in common as a jockey and a diesel driver. Somebody ought to tell you that, especially since 'creativity' is your subject here. Poems and novels arise out of radically different sensibilities and resemble each other not at all, and you cannot begin to make sense about 'creativity' or 'the artist' or even 'narcissism' if you are going to be so insensitive to fundamental distinctions having to do with age, accomplishment, background, and vocation. And if I may, sir,—his self is to many a novelist what his own physiognomy is to a painter of portraits: The closest subject at hand demanding scrutiny, a problem for his art to solve—given the enormous obstacles to truthfulness, the artistic problem. He is not simply looking into the mirror because his is transfixed by what he sees. Rather, the artist's success depends as much as anything on his powers of detachment, on de-narcissizing himself. That's where the excitement comes in. That hard conscious work that makes it art! (p. 240)

The vehemence with which Tarnopol argues this point is a good indication that Roth himself has been stung to the quick by the accusation of narcissism. Furthermore, he makes quite the same point about "de-narcissizing" in an interview with Joyce Carol Oates: "Isn't there really more self in the ostentatious display and assertiveness of The Great American Novel than in a book like Letting Go, say, where a devoted effort at self-removal and self-obliteration is necessary for the kind of investigation
of self that goes on there?" A redoubling of this "devoted effort" is undeniably in evidence in the much more complex *My Life As a Man*.

An ancillary issue instigated by this necessary scrutiny of the self is the altogether understandable desire on the part of the reader to know what "actually happened." In large part, the focus of the synopses was on the parallels between the two Zuckermans and Peter Tarnopol. A natural instinct is to extend this approach to the life of the real author, Philip Roth. Certainly, there are undeniable points of congruency, especially between Tarnopol and his creator: Both are born in 1933 and share similar backgrounds; both receive Guggenheim fellowships as well as major literary awards in 1960 - Roth received The National Book Award for *Goodbye, Columbus* and his protagonist the Prix de Rome of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences for *A Jewish Father*; both marry a divorced woman who dies in a car accident. Similarly, points of congruency exist between the Zuckerman of "Courting Disaster" and Roth: both attend Rutgers and teach at the University of Chicago; both receive early discharges from the army due to physical conditions.

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While all of this naturally piques the reader's interest, Roth comes down foursquare against the tendency to engage in what is essentially a form of gossip. His position on what he terms the "hooks of reality" in a fiction is clearly delineated in the following exchange with Dr. Spielvogel:

'Do you ask permission of the people you write about?'

'But I am not a psychoanalyst! The comparison won't work. I write fiction--or did, once upon a time. A Jewish Father was not 'about' my family, or about Grete and me, as you certainly must realize. It may have originated there, but it was a contrivance, an artifice, a rumination on the real. A self-avowed work of imagination, Doctor! I do not write about people in a strict factual or historical sense.'

'But then you think,' he said, with a hard look, 'that I don't either.'

'Dr. Spielvogel, please, that is just not a good enough answer. And you know it. First off, you are bound by ethical considerations that happen not to be the ones that apply to my profession. Nobody comes to me with confidences the way they do to you, and if they tell me stories, it's not so that I can cure what ails them. That's obvious enough. It's in the nature of being a novelist to make private life public--that's a part of what a novelist is up to.' (p. 250)

This not so veiled warning against the dangers of extrapolating from fiction to life is well taken. Not only is there a fundamental "conflict between fiction and reality," but one can never pierce the mysterious shroud which cloaks any author's "ruminations." One particularly telling example from the novel is the significance that a simple household utensil holds in "Courting Disaster"
and "My True Story." In the short story, Lydia Ketterer commits suicide by slashing her wrists with a can opener. A grotesque detail, to be sure, but why is this rather prosaic means of destruction chosen. In his autobiography, Tarnopol reveals that after an unsuccessful suicide attempt by Maureen, he searches her apartment for "evidence" to present at their ongoing divorce proceedings. In a night table in her bedroom, he finds a can opener, a trophy which he victoriously shows to Susan.

'Look--look at this!'
'It's a can opener.'
'It's also what she masturbates with! Look! Look at this nice sharp metal tooth. How she must love that protruding out of her--how she must love to look down at that!'
'Oh, Peter, wherever did you--'
'From her apartment--next to her bed.'
Out popped the tear.
'What are you crying about? It's perfect--don't you see? Just what she thinks a man is--a torture device. A surgical instrument!' (p. 317)

The can opener is to be the deranged Tarnopol's evidence of his estranged wife's sexual depravity in retaliation for her characterization of him before the court as "a well-known seducer of college girls." The obsessive and perverse grip the can opener has on Tarnopol's imagination is evidenced in a disquieting confession: "I have Maureen's here on my desk as I write." It has become an objective correlative for him of the horror,
despair, and brutality which characterized their life together. At the beginning of "My True Story," in her response to "Courting Disaster," his sister writes: "I never heard of anyone killing herself with a can opener. Awfully gruesome and oddly arbitrary, unless I am missing something." Exactly! The reader of fiction is always "missing something," and his time is much better spent in dealing with the work rather than in fruitless musings upon what is revealed about an author's life.  

To this point, the two aspects of the metanovel have been considered separately; the confluences of the autocritique and the traditional elements of the novel occur in Tarnopol's repeated acknowledgements of his inability to translate the raw data of his life into fiction. Particularly galling is his inability to fictively render the nasty bit of trickery which ushers him into marriage.

And I have never been able to introduce the story into a work of fiction, not that I haven't repeatedly tried and failed in the five years since I received Maureen's confession. I cannot seem to make it credible--probably because I still don't believe it myself. How could she? To me! No matter how I may contrive to transform low actuality into high

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16 I must echo the sentiments of Charles Newman as to the fidelity of the novel to Roth's own experience: "Whether "My True Story" contains the 'real facts' of Philip Roth's ménage I'm not the man to say...." (p. 88)
art, that is invariably what is emblazoned across the face of the narrative, in blood: HOW COULD SHE? TO ME! (p. 208)

Much the same complaint is made at the beginning of Roth's career in "Writing American Fiction," where he argues that the predicament of the contemporary American writer is that he has "his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make credible much of American reality." Roth's characterization of that reality applies as well to the reality of his marriage for Peter Tarnopol: "It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meager imagination." Even Maureen's death in a car accident "defies credulity."

If in a work of realistic fiction the hero was saved by something as fortuitous as the sudden death of his worst enemy, what intelligent reader would suspend his disbelief? Facile, he would grumble, and fantastic. Fictional wish fulfillment, fiction in the service of one's dreams. Not True to Life. And I would agree. Maureen's death is not True to Life. Such things simply do not happen, except when they do. (And as time passes and I get older, I find that they do with increasing frequency.) (pp. 112-13)

Of course, this is but another variation of the "conflict between fiction and reality" which is at the heart of this novel.

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17 refer to text above, Chapter II, p. 79.
The most important function of the autocritique in *My Life As a Man* remains to be discussed: Its significance in signalling Peter Tarnopol's liberation from a limited viewpoint within the context of the "open decision." Before I do so, a brief recapitulation of the argument of this study is in order.

My underlying assumption has been that Roth's fiction is informed by, reflects, and articulates the dilemmas posed by what J.H. Bryant terms the "open decision." The "open decision" is a relativistic perception of the universe and one's relation to it—a Weltanschauung—which recognizes that "reality" is ambiguous and paradoxical; therefore, critical to the "open decision" is the acceptance of chaos, ambiguity, and uncertainty as part of the given of human existence. To ignore this perspective constitutes a limited viewpoint, a denial of true consciousness. Bryant defines true consciousness as "the recognition that the self is not identical with or exhausted by selfconsciousness, that there is a great reality to be felt though not explained."\(^1\) Furthermore, the individual determines himself by the choices he makes; to attempt to escape

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\(^1\) This (and all subsequent quotations from Bryant's work) is taken from the introductory portion of the first chapter.
the consequences of those choices is inauthentic and
denotes a deficiency of consciousness. Within the frame-
work of the "open decision," the short stories and novels
which I examine focus either on the deficiency or the
discovery of true consciousness on the part of Roth's
protagonists. Moreover, the controlling principle or
logic governing Roth's artistic development is to be
found in the organic growth of consciousness demonstrated
by his confessional narrators; he himself delineates
the first three stages of this growth:

I can even think of these three characters--
Gabe Wallach, Alexander Portnoy and David Kepesh--
as three stages of a single explosive projectile
that is fired into the barrier that forms one
boundary of the individual's identity and
experience: That barrier of personal inhibition,
ethical conviction and plain, old monumental fear
beyond which lies the moral and psychological
unknown. Gabe Wallach crashes up against the
wall and collapses; Portnoy proceeds on through
the fractured mortar, only to become lodged there,
half in, half out. It remains for Kepesh to pass
right on through the bloody hole, and out the other
end, into no-man's land.19

If David Kepesh passes "right on through," *My Life As a Man*
must be read as Peter Tarnopol's reflections upon "no-man's
land."20

19 Refer to text above, Chapter I, p. 2.
20 John McDaniel also views the novel as Tarnopol's
look "back through the 'bloodied hole.'" (p. 177)
At the beginning of "My True Story,"
Tarnopol--the fourth stage--sends his sister the "Useful Fictions" which he has written at the Quahsay Colony. His psychoanalytic evaluation of the relationship between the two stories and the autobiography to follow is revealed indeed.

'Courting Disaster' is a post-cataclysmic fictional meditation on nothing more than my marriage: What if Maureen's personal mythology had been biographical truth? Suppose that, and suppose a good deal more--and you get 'C.D.' From a Spielvogelian perspective, it may even be read as a legend composed at the behest and under the influence of the super-ego, my adventures as seen through its eyes--as 'Salad Days' is something like a comic idyll honoring a Pannish (and as yet unpunished) id. It remains for the ego to come forward then and present its defense, for all the parties to the conspiracy-to-abscond-with-my-life to have had their day in court.

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. (p. 113)

Nothing like this has been attempted before in the entirety of Roth's canon. This three-pronged attack on "illusive reality" is dramatic evidence of Tarnopol's liberation from a limited viewpoint. Of course, it can be argued that, taken individually, these three versions are as limited as, say, Portnoy's single viewpoint; after all, the superego, id, and ego in question are Peter Tarnopol's. However, not only are the versions joined together within the context of the novel, but the presence of the other
autocritiques in "My True Story" must be taken into account. Implicit in Tarnopol's inclusion of these external autocritiques is an acceptance on his part of the relativistic perspective which is essential for the true consciousness of the "open decision." Certainly, Bryant's characterization of true consciousness is applicable to the "unresolved" description of Peter Tarnopol which emerges from the novel: "True consciousness brings with it a sense of wholeness though not completeness, for it acknowledges and affirms the ambiguities and paradoxes of which, by definition, the individual is constituted." Quite clearly, unlike Gabe Wallach and Alexander Portnoy, Tarnopol does not "seek to escape from the pain of existence's uncertainties into the certainties of complete explanation." Wallach and Portnoy's inauthentic struggle for moral certainty is not engaged in by Peter Tarnopol. He makes the moral decision of his life--to marry Maureen--and lives as best as he can with the consequences. The difference between the Zuckerman of "Courting Disaster" and Tarnopol is that he goes into isolation to come to grips with his history; Zuckerman, like Gabe Wallach, flees to Europe in the futile attempt to escape the pain of awareness and the debilitating consequences of his love for Moonie.
While all of these factors combine to determine Tarnopol's achievement of a world view consistent with the "open decision," a problem remains: What is it (other than those structural elements intrinsic to the reflexive novel and the epistemological orientation they imply), that differentiates him from David Kepesh, the first protagonist to break through the barrier of consciousness of the "open decision?" Kepesh's victory was contingent upon his ultimate acceptance of the human condition as it is given: In the words of his analyst, Dr. Klinger, he finally learns to "Tolerate it." In the interview with Joyce Carol Oates, Roth focuses on the distinctive form of Peter Tarnopol's acceptance.

Of course Tarnopol is relentlessly kicking himself for his mistake, but it is just those kicks (and the accompanying screams) that reveal to him how strongly determined by character, how characteristically Tarnopolian, that mistake was. He is his mistake and his mistake is him. 'This me who is me being me and none other!' The last line of My Life As a Man is meant to point up a harsher attitude toward the self, and the history it has necessarily compiled, than 'ironic acceptance' suggests....If there is an ironic acceptance of anything at the conclusion of My Life As a Man (or even along the way), it is of the determined self. And angry frustration, a deeply vexing sense of characterological enslavement, is strongly infused in that ironic acceptance. Thus the exclamation mark.21

In view of the intensity and magnitude of these bitter obstacles, Tarnopol's ironic acceptance of his intractable

"reality" is even more courageous, hard-won, and ultimately inspiring, than that of David Kepesh. He has traveled deep into the abyss and survived. To paraphrase what Nathan Zuckerman found so "stirring" about Lydia Ketterer, Peter Tarnopol has lived to tell the tale, to write the tale, and to write it for us.

With _My Life As a Man_, appropriately enough, Roth's most mature, technically complex, and fascinating work, the possibilities of the progression initiated with Gabe Wallach are finally exhausted. Peter Tarnopol's affecting struggle "to be humanish: manly, a man," is the ultimate stage of Roth's explosive projectile, for after the reflexive novel, after the reflection upon "no-man's land," what is left? Shortly after completing the work, Roth himself recognized the turning point in

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22I strongly concur with Mark Schechner's evaluation of the novel as Roth's best work, one which "engages his talent fully, at its most frantic, its most ironic, and its most subtle." (p. 427) Even those critics who expressed ambivalence about the novel were impressed by the quality of its prose and Roth's "perfect ear and ....cold eye." (Morris Dickstein, _New York Times Book Review_, June 2, 1974, p. 1.) Similarly, Martin Amis maintains "Roth can still write like a fallen angel; his sentences are dapper and sonorous, always eventful, never congested." ("Getting Hitched," _New Statesman_, November 1, 1974, p. 625) Of course, Roth receives the usual short shrift from the reviewer for _Commentary_: The novel is found to be a piece of "literary onanism." (John W. Aldridge, "Literary Onanism," _Commentary_, September 1974, 86.)
his literary career which *My Life As a Man* represents:

Right now nothing is cooking; at least none of the aromas have as yet reached me. For the moment this isn't distressing; I feel (again, for the moment) as though I've reached a natural break of sorts in my work, nothing nagging to be finished, nothing as yet pressing to be begun—only bits and pieces, fragmentary obsessions, bobbing into view, then sinking, for now, out of sight.  

This is not to say that his subsequent fiction will no longer be grounded in and examine the dilemmas of the "open decision." Whether his focus is on the problems of the individual consciousness (as it is in his most recent work, *The Professor of Desire*), or on the "obstacles of social tyranny" (as in *Our Gang* and *The Great American Novel*), Philip Roth will continue his valiant attempt "to understand, describe, and then make credible" what remains as ever a stupefying and infuriating American reality.

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