INTO THE CLEAR

Philip Roth puts turbulence in its place.

By David Remnick

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The summer before last, Philip Roth left his house in rural Connecticut to make one of his periodic raids on Babylon. He visited a few friends, got his hair cut, and, just before heading home, dropped by the offices of *The New Yorker*. Over sandwiches, he talked first about the Yankees, who were enjoying a summer of blissful accomplishment, and then, less happily, about the Clintons, who were not. Over the next year or so, when we met in New York or at the house in Connecticut, Roth proved as funny and as intense as his friends had said he was. "Philip is an unbelievably fierce man," the biographer Judith Thurman said. "His senses are quick and raw—he's the opposite of phlegmatic." When Roth is in the mood, he is a deft mimic (he can do any voice from the febrile ramblings of the sports-radio team Mike and the Mad Dog to the plummy anti-Americanisms of Harold Pinter); he is funny in the way a great Catskills comedian might be were that comedian also possessed of an immense linguistic gift. But on that summer day, while the country seemed to rock between pious concern and giggling fits, Roth was not at all in the mood. His dark, expressive eyes were deadly serious. It was the summer of Monica, a season drenched in a "treacherous and subversive pleasure: the ecstasy of sanctimony," as Roth eventually put it. This was the season of "that depends on what your definition of 'is' is," of the Starr report and oral-sex jokes in the office, and the rage and the accusations and the ceaseless chatter that plumped the ratings. Many of Roth's most persistent themes were coming into play: betrayal, false piety, a flawed man's struggle with the repellent and the libidinous—and now, while he was wondering what Clinton might do, Roth straightened and said, only half in jest, "Maybe he should get on TV and talk frankly about adultery." Maybe he could talk about the complexity of a long and difficult marriage, about frailty, and maybe he'd dare to ask if he is really so alone in

his weaknesses. But there was, of course, no political sense in that. Then Roth said, "Why don't you get a bunch of novelists to write about this?" Why cede a national discussion of morality, of men and women, to "Hardball" and "The Beltway Boys"? In the end, however, one of the few writers to say no to the idea was Philip Roth.

As it turned out, he couldn't spare the time, because he was writing a novel set in the summer of America's "purity binge, when terrorism—which had replaced communism as the prevailing threat to the country's security—was succeeded by cocksucking." He was writing "The Human Stain," the book that now completes a trilogy on postwar American life. Before it came "American Pastoral," which was set in the Vietnam era, and "I Married a Communist," which took the McCarthy period as its backdrop. Roth is a storyteller who believes in getting quickly to the problem, to a character's predicament, and, in "The Human Stain," in a voice unmistakable for its directness and outrage, he swiftly sketches the moral and political weather in which his characters will move:

> It was the summer in America when the nausea returned, when the joking didn't stop, when the speculation and the theorizing and the hyperbole didn't stop, when the moral obligation to explain to one's children about adult life was abrogated in favor of maintaining in them every illusion about adult life, when the smallness of people was simply crushing, when some kind of demon had been unleashed in the nation and, on both sides, people wondered "Why are we so crazy?", when men and women alike, upon awakening in the morning, discovered that during the night, in a state of sleep that transported them beyond envy or loathing, they had dreamed of the brazenness of Bill Clinton. I myself dreamed of a mammoth banner draped dadaistically like a Christo wrapping from one end of the White House to the other and bearing the legend a human being lives here. It was the summer when—for the billionth time—the jumble, the mayhem, the mess proved itself more subtle than this one's ideology and that one's morality. It was the summer when a president's penis was on everyone's mind, and life, in all its shameless impurity, once again confounded America.

Roth does not attempt a fictional treatment of historical players, as Don DeLillo has done with Lee Harvey Oswald in "Libra" and with J. Edgar Hoover in "Underworld." Rather, in each book of the trilogy, history intrudes without rational explanation into the lives of ordinary people. Many years ago, in the comic experiment of "Our Gang," Roth thrust a grotesquely drawn president into the foreground—his Nixon, Trick E. Dixon, seemed to rise from a swamp of American iniquity—but now, in his late career, he works more in the tradition of Stendhal or Tolstoy, who put their Fabrices and Pierres, not Napoleon, in the foreground. History here is not scenery; history permeates the story, the minds of the characters, and the moral fabric of the book. In

“American Pastoral,” a Jewish-American Adonis, Seymour (Swede) Levov—a good son, an all-state athlete who inherits his father’s glovemaking factory in the ruins of Newark—marries a former Miss New Jersey, and moves to the stone house of his dreams in sylvan Old Rimrock; he loses everything that matters in his life when his daughter Merry “brings the war home” to New Jersey by blowing up the local post office. In “I Married a Communist,” a silent-film star, Eve Frame, betrays her husband, a radio actor and idealistic communist named Ira Ringold, in a marital rage fuelled by the climate of accusation during the McCarthy years. She publishes a memoir (ghostwritten by a gossip columnist) accusing him of spying for the Soviet Union. The book she writes is called “I Married a Communist.”

“The Human Stain” portrays a contemporary version of “the indigenous American berserk”: the leftish and reactionary pieties, the pervasive and knowing gossip, the impoverishment of the language, the atmosphere of political and sexual inquisition. The main character, Coleman Silk, is a classics professor with “an autocratic ego,” who teaches at the small New England college of Athena. Some of Silk’s colleagues resent him because, when he was dean of the faculty, he forced deadwood professors into retirement and was thought to be harsh and insufficiently impressed by the more voguish modes of writing and teaching. These colleagues seize on an opportunity for vengeance when Silk, faced with the continued absence of two students, innocently asks the class while calling roll, “Do they exist or are they spooks?” As it turns out, the missing students are black. It hardly matters that Silk does not know that: for his one-word infraction, for “spooks,” he is accused of racism, humiliated in front of his colleagues, and, finally, driven out of his job. The incident is so traumatic, so inexplicable, that when Silk’s wife dies he blames the college. The novel’s secret, revealed in chapter 2, is that Silk himself is black. Silk endured a childhood of bigotry and, like Alexander Portnoy before him, he yearned to free himself of the burdens and obligations of the “We,” of the group; but, unlike Portnoy, he had the perversity and the will—and the skin tone—to succeed. He trips the historical and ethnic lock. Or he thinks he has. (“Was it the social obstruction that he wished to sidestep? Was he merely being another American and, in the great frontier tradition, accepting the democratic invitation to throw your origins overboard if to do so contributes to the pursuit of happiness?”) Silk’s “victory,” his defection from his race and his own family, now helps to ruin him. As the world takes him for an aging Jewish racist, he is destroyed in a battle he cannot fight by a We he cannot escape.

In these late novels, Roth's narrator, Nathan Zuckerman, is no longer the singular and central presence he was in middle-period novels of the eighties like "The Ghost Writer," "Zuckerman Unbound," "The Anatomy Lesson," and "The Counterlife." Roth has aged Zuckerman considerably (and relieved him of his prostate and potency, for good measure); Zuckerman is more in the background, a recording—and imagining—angel. Once Roth's subject had been the vocation of a writer; now he has turned outward and toward a narrative of American history. He is using the novel as a vehicle for middle-class tragedy in which history happens to, rolls over, even destroys, ordinary men and women: a businessman, an actor, a teacher. Roth is no longer the wunderkind; he is sixty-seven, and the books reflect it. His voice is still charged, an endlessly pliable instrument of comedy and impersonation, but that voice has also darkened, its comedy is deeper, the story it tells is more tragic and painful. You find yourself laughing loudest just at the moment when the abyss widens. The funniest scene in "The Human Stain" comes when a damaged Vietnam veteran tries to overcome his trauma and his hatred of Asians by forcing himself to go with his local support group to a Chinese restaurant ("They count as gooks!"). His mates talk him through the wonton-soup course as if he were in a Mekong Delta firefight:

> Okay, Les, we got it under control. You can let go of the menu now. Les, let go of the menu. First with your right hand.

Silk, a reader steeped in Homer, Sophocles, and Aeschylus, careers toward a familiar Attic fate. After his banishment from Athena College and his wife's death, his one consolation is a consuming affair with Faunia Farley, a much younger woman who works as a janitor and farmhand. For this, too, Silk is condemned, pursued, and destroyed. His most avid accuser is a young professor of French literature named Delphine Roux, who "exposes" Silk's affair with Faunia, sending him an anonymous letter that reads, "Everyone knows you're sexually exploiting an abused, illiterate woman half your age."

The insidious phrase that resonates throughout the book is "everyone knows."

> "Everyone knows" is the invocation of the cliché and the beginning of the banalization of experience, and it's the solemnity and the sense of authority that people have in voicing the cliché that's so insufferable. What we know is that, in an unclichéd way, nobody knows anything. You can't know anything. The things you know you don't know. Intention? Motive? Consequence? Meaning? All that we don't know is astonishing. Even more astonishing is what passes for knowing.

Philip Roth lives in a town that, strictly speaking, lacks a town. There is a post office, but not much else. He lives in northwest Connecticut, where there are towns like Sharon, Litchfield, and Kent, with restaurants, antique stores, craft stores, libraries, schools, weekend warriors in S.U.V.s. "Up here, there's no beach, there's no town, there's no place for anybody to go, so all you have to do is stay at home," Roth said. We were driving in his Volvo along the banks of the Housatonic River. Suddenly, he went into "Deliverance" mode: "Well, o' course, we got the *rivah heah*, yessir we do!"

We drove through the hills. New York was a dreary mess of cold rain, but here the river was icy, clear as gin, and there was snow in the woods and in the trees. Roth, still playing the hick Virgil, piped up again, saying, "We got a bridge. Would you like to see a *real* bridge? Yessir!" He also made up an entire history of a flood near the bridge. "*Dang* near swamped the entire town, it did!"

Roth grew up in Newark (urban eastern Jersey is his Yoknapatawpha, his Combray), and he has spent long stretches in Chicago, Manhattan, Iowa City, Rome, and London. His house, a gray, two-story clapboard, was built in 1790. It is not easy to find, which is, for the owner, part of the attraction. Not long ago, Roth bought twenty acres to add to the forty he already owned. Since his separation from the English actress Claire Bloom, seven years ago, he has lived alone. He has very few visitors. In "The Ghost Writer," the older writer Lonoff says of Zuckerman that "an unruly personal life will probably better serve a writer like Nathan than walking in the woods and startling the deer. His work has turbulence—that should be nourished, and not in the woods." No longer. Enough unruliness. If turbulence remains one of Roth's dominant literary tones, "Order in living" is now his credo. "Philip lives like he's at Fort Dix," his friend Ross Miller, who teaches literature at the University of Connecticut, told me. "Everything precise and hospital corners." Roth wakes early and, seven days a week, walks fifty yards or so to a two-room studio. The front room is outfitted with a fireplace, a desk, and a computer set up on a kind of lectern where he can write standing up, the better to preserve a bad back. There are pictures here and there of his family: his father, Herman, who sold insurance for Metropolitan Life; his mother, Bess; his older brother, Sandy, who used to be in advertising and now paints. Most of Roth's books are in the big house, where they run, room after room, in alphabetical order by category.

It was a late-winter morning, and the snow was piled high around the studio. Roth was wearing a blue Shetland sweater, green corduroy pants. Often there is tweed. He dresses like a graduate student of the late fifties. He led me to the back room. There was a team photograph of the 1947 Brooklyn Dodgers. There were free weights, a lifting bench, and an exercise mat. He had quintuple-bypass surgery eleven years ago and is determined to keep in shape. He stays out here all day and into the evening: no telephone, no fax. Nothing gets in. In the late afternoons, he takes long walks, often trying to figure out connections and solve problems in the novel that's possessing him.

"I live alone, there's no one else to be responsible for or to, or to spend time with," Roth said. "My schedule is absolutely my own. Usually, I write all day, but if I want to go back to the studio in the evening, after dinner, I don't have to sit in the living room because someone else has been alone all day. I don't have to sit there and be entertaining or amusing. I go back out and I work for two or three more hours. If I wake up at two in the morning—this happens rarely, but it sometimes happens—and something has dawned on me, I turn the light on and I write in the bedroom. I have these little yellow things all over the place. I read till all hours if I want to. If I get up at five and I can't sleep and I want to work, I go out and I go to work. So I work, I'm on call. I'm like a doctor and it's an emergency room. And I'm the emergency."

Not long before I went up to see Roth in Connecticut, I was reading the text of a conversation he had had with the French philosopher Alain Finkielkraut, and, faced for the millionth time with the "Are you the guy in your novels?" question, Roth had pointed out a passage from Virginia Woolf's 1915 novel "The Voyage Out." A would-be writer says, "All you read a novel for is to see what sort of person the writer is, and, if you know him, which of his friends he's put in. As for the novel itself, the whole conception, the way one's seen the thing, felt about it, made it stand in relation to other things, not one in a million cares for that."

Considering the extent to which Roth has used his own life and character in fiction (in that way he is similar to Céline, Genet, and Gombrowicz), and even considering the degree to which he has been vacuumed up occasionally as an object of gossip, there's no mystery why he might like that passage of Woolf's. One night, I went with Roth to Columbia University, where he met with a graduate seminar led by his friend the novelist David Plante. They were reading "Operation Shylock," in which the main character, "Philip Roth," arrives in Israel in the year of the Demjanjuk trial only to be

tortured by a double, an imp of the perverse, named Pipik, who goes around Jerusalem announcing that he, in fact, is Roth. Sooner or later, one of the Columbia students asked Roth if the story was "true."

No, it isn't, he said gently: "None of this seems like autobiography to me. It seems like fiction. Not to say that one doesn't draw on one's experiences, but what counts is the use you make of it." Life is the amorphous thing and, to the artist, it feels nothing like art, the *made* thing, the considered thing. Both in life and in "Operation Shylock," Roth endured a mental breakdown after taking the tranquillizer Halcion, but whereas in life the breakdown was to no good purpose, except to be endured, in the novel the breakdown works to heighten the narrator's violent and confused encounter with Israel. Roth went through this explanation patiently, but when the subject finally turned to the made thing, to the novel, he brightened. "Every Jewish exigency, pain, and antagonism flows through 'Roth,' " he told the students. "In 'Finnegan's Wake,' there is the character Humphrey C. Earwicker, who sleeps with absolutely everything flowing through his mind, and Joyce uses the initials H.C.E. as 'Here Comes Everybody.' Well, in 'Operation Shylock' you have 'Here Comes Everybody Jewish.' Leon Klinghoffer. Jonathan Pollard. Menachem Begin. Meir Kahane. All these names were passing through the collective Jewish brain at the time, and I wanted to get inside the Jewish mind."

Roth's career began, forty-three years ago, with much the same project: writing about Jews. And, as a result of his fearlessness and bravado, of his aversion to a pious literature of virtue and victimhood, his public reputation began with scandal, distortion, and a wound. It was a modest scandal at first, and then became the sort of full-scale storm that may well be looked back upon as a curious relic.

Years later, Saul Bellow remarked that critics often thought of him, Bernard Malamud, and Roth as a small company of Jewish haberdashers, "the Hart, Schaffner & Marx" of American letters. But influence doesn't work in the mimetic or genetic way most critics would have it. Roth, as an undergraduate at Bucknell and later as a graduate student at the University of Chicago, did indeed read both Malamud and Bellow. In Malamud he saw "harsh fables" about urban immigrants; but they were fables about Roth's Yiddish-speaking elders, not his contemporaries, and they were written in the minor key of immigration rather than in the broad C major of full-fledged American immersion. In Bellow, particularly in "The Adventures of Augie March," Roth sensed something more congenial, more liberating, a narrator with an

aggressive native voice, far more American than immigrant Jew. The novel opens with a declaration of citizenship, not nostalgia: "I am an American, Chicago born." For Roth, "the spine of American literature" in the twentieth century is Faulkner and Bellow, and although Roth has never written *like* Bellow—no reader would ever mistake those two voices for one another—it was "Augie March" that gave him the permission to cut loose, to write not of a victimized European generation living in the shadowland of immigration but of a younger generation steeped in America, in its freedom and talk, its energies and superabundance.

For Roth, growing up in New Jersey in the forties was never about getting beaten up, about pogroms or tortured shopkeepers. "My experience," Roth said, "had been about our aggression, our going out into Newark, three or four of us, wandering the streets at night, shooting crap in back of the high school with flashlights, girls, going after your date to this gathering place called Syd's on Chancellor Avenue and telling your sex stories. It was that verbal robustness, people talking, being terrifically funny, playing ball, competing, the energy flowing out. . . . Appetite. Maybe that's the word. It was the appetites that were aggressive."

Then, in March, 1959, *The New Yorker* published "Defender of the Faith," a story about a Jewish recruit at an Army base in Missouri at the end of the Second World War, who tries to wangle special treatment out of his Jewish sergeant. The germ of the scandal lay, first, in the fact that the recruit was a devious kid playing on the guilty fellow-feeling of his officer and, second, in the fact that the story wasn't being published in a Jewish magazine or in a quarterly. Roth had certainly published stories about Jews before, including "You Can't Tell a Man by the Song He Sings," in *Commentary*, and "The Conversion of the Jews," in the *Paris Review*, but those were relatively small journals for highbrow readers who were used to far more radical ideas and jokes. *The New Yorker* was something different. The magazine published many Jewish writers, including J. D. Salinger, S. J. Perelman, and Irwin Shaw; Isaac Bashevis Singer's stories, translated from the Yiddish, eventually became a mainstay; but the aura of the place in 1959 was more Bronxville than Upper West Side.

Roth did not anticipate anything other than the simple pleasures of early publication. He was living in a two-room basement apartment in the East Village, and, on the day the magazine was to appear, he kept going up to his neighborhood kiosk asking, "You got it yet?" When it finally came in, he bought four copies.

"I'd open it and close it, and look at it from here and look at it from there, and read it, read it and then the words would just blast out of my mind and it all made no sense. It was terribly thrilling." A few days later, his editor at the magazine, Rachel MacKenzie, called, saying they were getting a lot of letters, many of them angry. Then came a call from the Anti-Defamation League, and then word that rabbis around the city and beyond were decrying the story in their sermons. His sin was simple: he'd had the audacity to write about a Jewish kid as being flawed, as being aggressive and conniving, as being interested in money—and he had done it in a national magazine. He had violated the tribal code on Jewish self-exposure: Not in front of the goyim! The letters poured in, both to the magazine and to Roth:

Mr. Roth:

With your one story, "Defender of the Faith," you have done as much harm as all the organized anti-Semitic organizations have done to make people believe that all Jews are cheats, liars, connivers. Your one story makes people—the general public—forget all the Jews who have lived, all the Jewish boys who served well in the armed services, all the Jews who live honest hard lives the world over.

One letter came to the Anti-Defamation League from a prominent rabbi, reading, "What is being done to silence this man? Medieval Jews would have known what to do with him."

Roth was not so much frightened by the hostility as he was engaged. He was not a young twenty-six; he was ambitious, he'd travelled, he'd taught at the University of Chicago, he'd been in the army. There was something exciting (at first) about getting a reaction to his stories, a reaction out in the world, beyond his circle of friends and editors.

"I was not in flight from it and I wanted to find out who these people were," Roth told me. "Suddenly, I was the center of controversy with these rabbis, all of whom were my seniors by thirty years, and who had constituencies, who had congregations."

For a while, the scandal seemed mild, manageable. "Goodbye, Columbus," a collection that included "Defender of the Faith," won the National Book Award in 1960, and Roth was invited to speak to campus Hillel groups and synagogue congregations. Usually, the questions were polite, easily absorbed. But then, in 1962, Roth, while teaching in Iowa, was invited to be on a panel at Yeshiva University, the academic bastion of Orthodox Judaism, in Washington Heights. "I felt that I was obliged to do

this, I wanted to do it, and it seemed to me tied up with writing," Roth said. "I had written something that provoked this response and I had to be responsible to it. I don't know how at twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty I could have responded any differently. Now I might respond to it by just letting the fiction speak for itself."

The panel was called "The Crisis of Conscience in Minority Writers of Fiction," and it also included Pietro di Donato, the author of a proletarian novel called "Christ in Concrete," and Ralph Ellison, whose 1952 novel, "Invisible Man," was starting to come under attack from radical black nationalists. That night at Yeshiva was a slaughter. The students practically ignored the outsiders, Ellison and di Donato, and focussed on their own, on Roth. They battered him, asking him over and over, in one form or another, "Mr. Roth, would you write the same stories if you lived in Nazi Germany?" (This is much the same question that the imperious Newark judge Leopold Wapter asks Nathan Zuckerman, almost two decades later, in "The Ghost Writer": "Can you honestly say that there is anything in your short story that would not warm the heart of a Julius Streicher or a Joseph Goebbels?") Over and over, Roth answered, "But we live in the *opposite* of Nazi Germany!" And he got nowhere.

"Finally, in about the eleventh round," Roth recalled, "when Ralph had a feeling I couldn't come out for the twelfth, he came out and said, 'What's going on here?' Ellison said that he had gotten mail from black readers furious with him for having depicted incest in a black family—a sharecropper who sleeps with his daughter." A typical letter asked how he could write such a scene while the civil-rights movement was just starting. Ellison told the audience his only answer was to insist on a novelist's independence: "I am not a cog in the machinery of civil-rights legislation."

The Yeshiva students listened politely to Ellison—and then went right back to pummelling Roth. After the program ended and Roth was trying to leave the stage, the students who had been most antagonistic gathered around him, surrounded him, shouting. One even shook his fist, crying out, "You were brought up on anti-Semitic literature!"

"Yes?" Roth said. "And what is that?"

"English literature," came the answer. "English literature is anti-Semitic literature!"

Later that night, at a post mortem at the Stage Delicatessen, Roth looked up from his pastrami sandwich and told his friends, "I'll never write about Jews again."

In fact, Roth's next two books, "Letting Go" and "When She Was Good," were his least antic, his least Jewish. But that restraint did not satisfy him, either. The incident at Yeshiva, the urge to speak with a voice that came more from Newark than from the graduate-school seminar rooms, the desire to write in a prose as energized as the sixties, led him toward "Portnoy's Complaint." This time, there was no innocence, no accident involved. He set out thinking, You want outrage? I'll give you outrage!

The gestation period of "Portnoy's Complaint" was long, complicated, and chaotic. Its first incarnation was a two-hundred-page riff called "The Jewboy," based on a Newark childhood. Then came the draft of a play called "The Nice Jewish Boy"—"in its way a less comforting, more aggressive 'Abie's Irish Rose,' " Roth called it—that was read as a workshop exercise at the American Place Theatre in 1964, with Dustin Hoffman in the main role. Then, after finishing "When She Was Good," in 1966, Roth wrote a long monologue "beside which the fetid indiscretions of 'Portnoy's Complaint' would appear to be the work of Louisa May Alcott." The piece featured a slide-show lecture about the intimate organs of the famous and a lengthy disquisition on the subject of adolescent masturbation. There came yet another manuscript, this one titled "Portrait of the Artist," which focussed, in part, on a Jewish family, the Portnoys. Finally, there was a short story, "A Jewish Patient Begins His Analysis"; the breakthrough of the story was setting it in the office of a psychoanalyst—the setting, eventually, for "Portnoy's Complaint." This gave the rage and obscenity, the performance-piece comedy, a literary frame, a context for unfiltered confession.

"I needed permission, and permission came with casting the book as a psychoanalytic confession," Roth told me. "The theatre of the analyst's office says the rule here is that there are no rules, the rule here is no inhibitions, the rule here is no restraint, the rule here is no decorum." The novel that resulted had little to do with Vietnam, civil rights, or any other political question of the sixties, but in its openness, in its unhinged comedy and freedom, it was a book of its time. Alexander Portnoy tells all to his shrink, all of it: the joy of his Jewish neighborhood in Newark—

White bread, rye bread,

Pumpernickel, challah,

All those for Weequahic,

Stand up and hollah!

—the passionate grip of his overweening goddess-mother, Sophie, "who could accomplish anything. . . .She could make jello, for instance, with sliced peaches hanging in it, just *suspended* there, in defiance of the law of gravity"; the bathroom agonies of his life-weary father, who chews vainly on Ex-Lax and dried fruit "by the pound bag" and falls asleep on the toilet, a man who, "in his retirement now, has really only one subject into which he can sink his teeth, the New Jersey Turnpike." Portnoy confesses his adventures in masturbation: ejaculating into a cored apple, into a baseball glove, into a Mounds-bar wrapper, into an empty milk bottle, into "Lenore Lapidus's big fat red-hot brassiere!," and (in perhaps the most famous solo performance since Lindbergh crossed the Atlantic) into a piece of refrigerated liver, the Portnoy family dinner. Portnoy yearns to be good, to lash himself to the mast of respectability, and at the same time rages against all the ropes that would bind him there—family, religion, taboos:

> Look, am I exaggerating to think it's practically miraculous that I'm ambulatory? The hysteria and the superstition! The watch-its and the be-carefuls! You mustn't do this, you can't do that—hold it! don't! you're breaking an important law! *What* law! *Whose* law! They might as well have had plates in their lips and rings through their noses and painted themselves blue for all the human sense they made! Oh, and the *milchiks* and *flaishiks* besides, all those *meshuggeneh* rules and regulations on top of their own private craziness! It's a family joke that when I was a tiny child I turned from the window out of which I was watching a snowstorm, and hopefully asked, "Momma, do we believe in winter?" Do you get what I'm *saying*? I was raised by Hottentots and Zulus! I couldn't even contemplate drinking a glass of milk with my salami sandwich without giving serious offense to God Almighty. Imagine then what my conscience gave me for all that jerking off!

"Portnoy's Complaint" was a bestseller (more than four hundred thousand copies sold when it came out, in 1969) and became as much a part of the popular culture that year as Woodstock and the Mets. Roth had crossed over; he had already gained a serious reputation, but now he also showed that he could shift easily from low burlesque to high drama. And yet there were repercussions that would haunt him for decades. Not only did "Portnoy" 's success vault Roth into the bizarre and disorienting realm of American celebrity (the gossip columnist Leonard Lyons wrote that he was dating Barbra Streisand; they'd never met); it also conflated the character Portnoy and his author to such a degree that anyone—anyone!—felt free to identify Roth as a kind of erotomaniac who prowled Broadway looking for shiksas. Jacqueline Susann went on the "Tonight Show" to promote "The Love Machine" that year and told Johnny Carson that she might like to meet Philip Roth, her rival for the No. 1 spot on the *Times* bestseller list, "But I wouldn't want to shake his hand." Jacqueline Susann! The

intimacy of Roth's voice seemed to invite this sort of thing. It still does. To this day, on Broadway, people will stop him to make a joke about masturbation or delicatessens.

Even Roth's parents, who collected all the reviews and clippings as trophies, had to endure the sneers of people around them who assumed they were the models for the Portnoys and that Philip was somehow anti-Semitic. "Our folks were wonderful about it," Roth's brother, Sandy, told me. "Their friends were not great readers, they just repeated crap that other people said."

The book was, in the main, badly read. Of course, "Portnoy" was hilarious and profane, but many of Roth's critics and readers seemed to miss the pain in the comedy, the violence done, say, when a father betrays his son and pays the boy's Gentile girlfriend a hundred dollars to get lost, and then ends up in a horrible fight in the basement with his son. What people missed, too, was Portnoy's paradox, his desire to defect—to be free of the suffocating We, the family, the congregation, the ethos of victimhood and virtue, all of it—and, at the same time, the equally powerful desire to listen to his mother, to cut off his affair with his lover, Monkey, to be a good boy, to pay proper respect to history, to be a good son, a good Jew:

> Oh, to be a center fielder, a center fielder—and nothing more!
>
> But I am something more, or so they tell me. A Jew. . . .Can't you see, my dear parents, from whose loins I somehow leaped, that such thinking is a trifle barbaric? That all you are expressing is your *fear*? The very first distinction I learned from you, I'm sure, was not night and day, or hot and cold, but *goyische* and Jewish! But now it turns out, my dear parents, relatives, and assembled friends, who have gathered here to celebrate the occasion of my bar mitzvah, it turns out, you schmucks! you narrow-minded schmucks!—oh, how I hate you for your Jewish narrow-minded minds! . . . Jew Jew Jew Jew Jew Jew! It is coming out of my ears already, the saga of the suffering Jews! Do me a favor, my people, and stick your suffering heritage up your suffering ass—*I happen also to be a human being!*

Perhaps it's hard now to imagine how transgressive this all was thirty years ago, hard to picture the outrage, so much more intense than what had been aroused by "Defender of the Faith." To this day, ethnic fiction too often asks to be loved purely for its affiliations, its purity and virtue; this was a voice in struggle with its affiliations, in rebellion against purity. It did not ask to be loved, and it often wasn't. Certainly not by the ethnic leadership. Once more, rabbis took to the pulpit. The reaction among many Jewish intellectuals was as hysterical as it had been in the Hadassahs of suburbia. One of the most censorious essays came from Gershom Scholem, the distinguished Jewish scholar and the author of definitive studies of Jewish mysticism.

Scholem wrote about "Portnoy" in the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz*, branding it a "revolting book," worse than the "Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion" because it provided anti-Semites with "authentic evidence" of Jewish perfidy:

> This is the book for which all anti-Semites have been praying. I daresay that with the next turn of history, not long to be delayed, this book will make all of us defendants at court. We will pay the price, not the author. . . . I wonder what price k'lal yisrael [the world Jewish community]—and there is such an entity in the eyes of the Gentiles—is going to pay for this book. Woe to us on that day of reckoning!

Saul Bellow, who first met Roth at the University of Chicago in the fifties, told me, "Gershom Scholem was a Jew who left Germany and settled in Jerusalem and was likely to draw a parallel between the United States and the Germany he left behind, and he saw symptoms of this terrible problem in Philip's work and in me as well. He was mistaken. These things didn't mean what he thought they did. I think Scholem had in mind Nazi Germany and not the United States."

Less understandable, and far more wounding to Roth, was an assault by Irving Howe, in *Commentary* in 1972. Howe was not an émigré. As an eminence in both literary journalism and left-wing politics, he knew the American context as well as anyone, and yet, after showing early support, he now declared Roth "an exceedingly joyless writer" whose "unfocused hostility" is the "ground-note" of his sensibility. He attacked not merely "Portnoy" but its author as well, warning of a "deficiency" in Roth's character, an emptiness beneath the "comedian's shuffle and patter."

"The cruelest thing anyone can do with 'Portnoy's Complaint' is to read it twice," Howe wrote. "An assemblage of gags strung onto the outcry of an analytic patient, the book thrives best on casual responses; it demands little more from the reader than a nightclub performer demands." In an insult sure to resound with the *Commentary* audience, he compared Roth not to Aristophanes or Swift but to Harry Golden: "Between 'Portnoy's Complaint' and 'For Two Cents Plain' there is finally no great difference of sensibility." In the very magazine that had helped launch Roth's career, Howe, the respected elder, was undermining Roth's seriousness, his authenticity. (This was the same Howe who excoriated Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin, in a 1963 essay in *Dissent*, for not being, in essence, sufficiently black.)

Howe's review in *Commentary* represented a terrible rebuke for Roth, and it gnawed at him for years. In "The Anatomy Lesson" (1983), Roth transforms himself into

Zuckerman and Howe into the insufferable Milton Appel, and, with barely concealed rage, writes that Appel "had unleashed an attack upon Zuckerman's career that made MacDuff's assault upon Macbeth look almost lackadaisical." To this day, Roth keeps on his wall a drawing made for him by his friend the artist Philip Guston, depicting a stabbed and bleeding critic, a pipe dangling from his lips.

And yet Scholem, Howe, and the damning rabbis were not alone. "Portnoy" was a difficult book even for the most sympathetic reader. At the time, a strong supporter like Bellow could not fully embrace the comic extravagance of Roth's novel.

"I didn't get much of a kick out of 'Portnoy's Complaint' back then," Bellow said. "Maybe there was a shred or two of respectability still clinging to me then. I wasn't *down* on it. I was amused, but it wasn't pure joy.

"I'm not sure Philip always realizes that he is being outrageous," Bellow went on. "He feels a writer should provoke—and he should, if that is the way he is inclined—but he can't expect to evade the results of this provocation. Philip is a radical. He feels he should treat the bizarre as if it were perfectly normal."

Roth told me he was never naïve about the provocative nature of some of his books, but the attacks, along with the freakish feel of celebrity, helped drive him out of the city and to an increasingly solitary way of living.

"I felt visible and exposed," he said. "Somebody who had just read 'Portnoy's Complaint' would come up to me and say, 'I don't eat liver anymore.' It was funny the first seven thousand times I heard it." For a while, Roth lived in Woodstock, New York, near Philip Guston, and then he bought the house in Connecticut, and he has lived there, for the most part, ever since.

Working in Connecticut, and often for part of each year in London in the late seventies and eighties, Roth became a consistently prolific and evolving writer. The book-chat cliché that dismissed him as a gifted comedian who had then dived headlong into his own pool of Narcissus was always a vulgarity, on the same low level as dismissing Updike as a preternaturally skillful writer of surfaces or, for that matter, Dickens as a writer of potboilers. Many novelists are read dismissively, but it's been doubly so for Roth.

There are welcome surprises sometimes. Last year, Roth received an invitation to an all-Roth literary conference in Aix-en-Provence. He had not been to Europe for a decade, and he was reluctant to interrupt his work for even a few days. His friends had to convince him that basking in the Mediterranean sun and meeting with a group of serious readers of his books hardly amounted to a sentence to Elba. Once Roth was in Aix, he was delighted: his books were for sale and, evidently, read; the mayor gave him the key to the city; he was celebrated everywhere he went; on the main roads and side streets of Aix, red banners bearing his portrait and the words "The Roth Explosion" flapped in the breeze—a detail that, as Roth told his French hosts, "has made me understand a little about what it must have been like to be Chairman Mao."

Sitting each day in the audience of a large auditorium, Roth heard panels of American and French critics discuss his later novels; from the stage, he led two master classes. The classes were more like literary press conferences and the questioners were, in the main, local graduate students, young men and women educated to a crisp in the great French fryer of Continental literary education, with its bubbling Derridian rhetoric and dubious wordplay. Roth, who learned to read at Bucknell and the University of Chicago a half century ago, was dumbstruck as he was pressed on the significance of his characters' names: Seymour (Swede) Levov, it means "love"? Lev? Lion? And, Seymour. It means See-more? See-*more*, yes? And what about Merry? Is she the Mary? Christ's Mary? There were questions about numerology, about the "tripartite nature" of "American Pastoral": its three generations, its three parts, its three family members. Then the subject turned to the Talmud and Hebrew philology (Roth's Jewish learning is modest, and he speaks Catskills Yiddish and no Hebrew). On all these matters, Roth suggested to the French students that perhaps they were reading with a "subtlety that is misplaced." He hoped instead that they would begin to think of "American Pastoral" as a book less about the mysteries of its names than as one about the costs of a revolutionary period in American life, about "the uncontrollability of real things," the inability to explain random events and catastrophes in a good man's life.

Later, when I asked Roth about such readings, he laughed, and said, "It's like baseball. Suppose you and I went up to the ballpark together, and there's a guy next to us with his kid. And he was saying, 'Now, what I want you to do is watch the scoreboard. Stop watching the field. Just watch what happens when the numbers change on the scoreboard. Isn't that great? Now, do you see what just happened up there? Did you

see what happened? Why did that happen?' And you say, 'That guy is crazy.' But the kid imbibes it and he goes home and he's asked, 'How was the game?' And he says, 'Great! The scoreboard changed thirty-two times and Daddy said last game it changed only fourteen times and the home team last time changed more times than the other team. It was really great! We had hot dogs and we stood up at one point to stretch and we went home.' Is that politicizing the baseball game? Is that theorizing the baseball game? No, it's having not the foggiest idea in the world what baseball is."

Not long ago, Norman Manea, a Romanian émigré writer and one of Roth's closest friends, invited Roth to speak to a class at Bard College about his 1995 novel "Sabbath's Theater," an incendiary portrait of Mickey Sabbath, a broke and despairing Falstaff who refuses every social propriety or sexual regulation. Manea feared that his students would attack Roth for the usual reasons: that his portrayal of women was insufficiently "sympathetic," that his ideas about sex were retrograde, that the hero Mickey Sabbath was neither heroic nor congenial, that the book failed the compassion test. "Of course, the day before, I tried to prepare them, to show them that there were some women who are this way, others another, and that Drenka, the main female character, is equal to Sabbath in her erotic proclivities," Manea said. "These are women, after all, not cats. They are different. I had to explain that to demand that everyone female be nice is just like when I was in Romania and they said that all the characters who were workers had to be nice workers." As a way of showing that the rude and the obscene are not new to Western literature, Roth read from Rabelais. That seemed to work. At a subsequent session, on "I Married a Communist," things did not go so well. Near the end of that class, Roth read to the students from an account of the trial of Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuli Daniel, two of the leading literary dissidents in the Brezhnev period. In the transcript, the judge demands to know from Daniel why he writes such unpleasant things about "the Soviet people." Daniel replies that these are not "the Soviet people" but, rather, characters in his book. "Even in the writers' union," Daniel says, "they don't ask that we write only about nice people."

But Roth's tactic only seemed to make matters worse.

"Philip could not make them see the novel from a more literary point of view and not politicize everything," Manea said.

Although it has been many years since some of the grandees in the Jewish establishment attacked Roth, it is still a commonplace to hear that his novels

never paint a rounded portrait of a female character, that they are somehow "hostile" to women. At one point in "Sabbath's Theater," Roth lampoons such reductive thinking when he quotes from a young woman's notes in a college lecture course. Of Yeats's poem "Meru," she writes, "Class criticized poem for its lack of a woman's perspective. Note unconscious gender privileging—*his* terror, *his* glory, *his* (phallic) monuments."

Roth's friend the Irish novelist Edna O'Brien told me, "As regards women, Philip has been mistakenly accused of not liking or understanding them. That's tosh! Take Faunia, his most recent heroine: she is generous, funny, astute, and, like many a woman, castigated for her sexual robustness. She stands in extreme and salutary contrast to Monica Lewinsky, whose come-hither carried the hidden resolve of betrayal."

Roth does not like to talk much about these things, for fear of arousing more argument and hostility. His opinion about the state of reading, in the academy and in the culture generally, seems now to be what makes him most unhappy.

"Every year, seventy readers die and only two are replaced. That's a very easy way to visualize it," Roth said. By "readers," he said, he means people who read serious books seriously and consistently. The evidence "is everywhere that the literary era has come to an end," he said. "The evidence is the culture, the evidence is the society, the evidence is the screen, the progression from the movie screen to the television screen to the computer. There's only so much time, so much room, and there are only so many habits of mind that can determine how people use the free time they have. Literature takes a habit of mind that has disappeared. It requires silence, some form of isolation, and sustained concentration in the presence of an enigmatic thing. It is difficult to come to grips with a mature, intelligent, adult novel. It is difficult to know what to make of literature. That's why I say stupid things are said about it, because unless people are well trained they don't know quite what to make of it."

We were sitting at Roth's kitchen table, and I could see that he was eager to change the subject. We'd talked about this before, and it made him anxious; he sensed that saying these things would make him seem crotchety and sour, hostile to his audience. But I said, "Go further."

Roth straightened in his chair. "Go further? You wanna know? All right. Well, I think

that the whole effort of certainly the first half of the twentieth century, the whole intellectual and artistic effort, was to see *behind* things, and that is no longer of interest. To explore consciousness was the great mission of the first half of the century —whether we're talking about Freud or Joyce, whether we're talking about the Surrealists or Kafka or Marx, or Frazer or Proust or whoever. The whole effort was to expand our sense of what consciousness is and what lies behind it. It's no longer of interest. I think that what we're seeing is the narrowing of consciousness. I read the other day in a newspaper that I occasionally see that Freud was a kind of charlatan or something worse. This great, tragic poet, our Sophocles! The writer is just not of interest to the public as somebody who may have an inroad into consciousness. The writer is only interesting in terms of how much money did he get and what's the scandal. That's all they're interested in. Why? Because the other stuff is useless, they don't want it. There has always been a debate over what literature is and what's it for, because it is a mysterious thing, and the mysterious side of existence, certainly for secular people, is not an urgent problem.

"I'm not a good enough student of whatever you have to be a student of to figure this out, but one gets the sense—and not just on the basis of the death of reading—that the American branch of the species is being retooled. I see the death of reading as just an aspect of this. I have to see it that way, otherwise it's just cultural whining, and cultural whining is boring. It's an aspect of some great shift that's occurred—been going on for a while—in that which interests the most intelligent members of American society."

In this period of Roth's maturity, his book sales have been modest, ranging between thirty and forty-five thousand in hardcover. The "Portnoy" days are long past. But this, he said, is hardly the point: "It doesn't make any difference really if a hundred thousand read the book or ten thousand or five thousand, frankly. Five thousand people is a lot of people. And, as a friend of mine said about five thousand readers, 'If they came through your living room one at a time they'd leave you in tears.'

"So when I talk of the death of reading, I'm not saying, 'Poor me, or poor the other guy, we don't have the readership.' I just mean that this great human endeavor has come to an end, when we're talking about the serious novel, and that is worth marking. I'm sixty-seven years old and writing now in 2000. I started publishing in 1959 in *The New Yorker*. Believe me, I know. If it were otherwise I'd be delighted. But I'm not despairing, I tell you. How can you be despairing about this and spend ten

hours a day writing? I'd do it anyway."

In 1993, just as he was reaching a point of real mastery, Philip Roth met with a crisis. As an artist, he had deepened his subject, moving to a more varied cast of characters and a sense of place—and, above all, toward deeper feeling, a more tragic voice. There were a couple of lesser books along the way—"The Facts" and "Deception"—but there were three books as fine as any he'd ever written: "The Counterlife"; a memoir of his father's dying, "Patrimony"; and "Operation Shylock." "The Counterlife" employs postmodern devices—the playing and replaying of scenes—and at the same time is drenched in emotion, not least the narrator's outrage over English anti-Semitism. In many ways, "Operation Shylock" is "Portnoy" brought to the next level of comedy and psychological tumult. But, while Roth was now writing well, his life was coming apart. Crippling back pain, the disintegration of his marriage to Claire Bloom, and a deep depression left him undone. And yet, eventually, with the help of his friends, Roth was somehow able to turn back to his work with greater concentration than ever before. With that sense of having survived a crisis, there came a liberating feeling of aesthetic release, and he began to write "Sabbath's Theater."

"Philip was falling apart," Judith Thurman said. "He was antic and unbelievably depressed and overwhelmed. He felt trapped and run to ground by a life he didn't want to be living. He was also deeply exasperated by the condescension from reviewers and their clichés: Roth the enemy of the Jews, the bugbear of feminism, the hysteric, the narcissist—all of that, though he cared about that less. So the response was 'I'm going to do what I'm doing for me and the twenty-five people I care about. I'm going to retire to the country and write my books.' So out of chaos came this hunkering down."

Ross Miller: "What happened to him was essentially acknowledging that even the strongest human being can be brought to his knees by an almost farcical combination of a bad marriage, a bad back, death. All the things he satirizes in 'The Anatomy Lesson' happened to him: the sudden loss of vitality, the collapse—and then the recovery, which gave him a sense of freedom."

Norman Manea: "Philip now has the internal structure of a soldier. He is close to his mates, his friends and family in the trenches, there is solidarity there and he will not

betray that. This is crucial for him. 'Sabbath's Theater' was written after this great crisis, and he just locked himself up and ate from a can and wrote. . . . I have changed a lot since I came here from Romania, but Philip has changed more. He went from being a social guy with the world in his fist to being a very reclusive man, very reluctant to reënter the chaos of the world. He created a strong, artificial order that became his natural order. He paid a heavy price, but he was lucky that, having paid it, he was compensated by literature."

Once, when we were talking about his career, I asked Roth when he had felt the happiest. Sometimes, when he is talking about books, he pauses for just a moment, the better to gather a well-formed argument. But now he answered immediately, definitely: When was he happiest? "When I was writing 'Sabbath's Theater,' " he said.

"But why?" The moment just after all that pain.

"Because I felt free. I feel like I am *in charge* now."

There was a time, in the eighties, when writing was hard for Roth, when hundreds of pages would end up in the trash before a novel would begin in earnest: "I'd sit there and think, I can't stand this, I can't stand myself, I can't stand being in this room, I can't stand the frustration of this room. That's what it was: the drip, drip, drip of the frustration. It was like an acid drip." But now there is tremendous fluency. Not to overrate the importance of personal crisis in the creation of an imaginative literature —thousands endure tragedy without any art coming of it—but Roth was able to convert personal crisis, a period when he thought he might never write again, and to pull himself out of that and onto a plane of mastery. "Like Charlie Parker, Philip can play what he hears now," Ross Miller said. "Writing is easy for him now, where it was once hard." Of course, Roth's fluency in writing his recent books could not have happened without the many years of labor, any more than Parker could play his improvisations without thousands of hours practicing chord changes. The craft and the imagination would not be there, would not be on call, without this singular sense of devotion and the time and the quiet and the health it seems to require.

"I don't think Philip has ever been this happy, certainly not since I've known him," Judith Thurman said. "He now lives the life he's always wanted to live without the beholdenness to others except to the people he cares about. He's like a graduate student/monk. There are not a lot of moving parts to his life now. Complicated

domestic arrangements, the needs and conflicts of family life, are all Rube Goldberg machines, and he now does without that. When you are younger, you're propelled by a lot of unslaked desires. Now there is this one thing: the work."

Over the years, Roth has let himself be diverted at times from the work. He taught at the University of Pennsylvania and Hunter College. He conducted a series of interviews with Aharon Appelfeld, Ivan Klima, Milan Kundera, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Edna O'Brien, and Primo Levi—a collection that will one day be published as "Shop Talk." For Penguin, he edited the influential "Writers from the Other Europe" series, a paperback publishing project that brought Kundera, Tadeusz Borowski, Bruno Schulz, Ludvík Vaculík, Tadeusz Konwicki, and Danilo Kis to the attention of American readers. There were lectures and readings, there were PEN reports to write and trips to Prague and Jerusalem, there were Op-Ed pieces to write for the *Times*, there were petitions to sign, readings to give, there were love affairs, friendships, elderly parents. Now there is work, and that is nearly all. For a long time, Roth kept two small signs near his desk. One read, "Stay Put," the other, "No Optional Striving." Optional striving appears to be a category that includes everything save writing, exercise, sleep, and solitude.

"It's a wonderful experience," Roth said. "That act of passionate and minute memory is what binds your days together—days, weeks, months—and living with that is my greatest pleasure. I think for any novelist it has to be the greatest pleasure, that's why you're doing it—to make the daily connections. I do it by living a very austere life. I don't experience it as being austere in any negative sense, but you have to be a bit like a soldier with a barracks life, or whatever you want to call it. That is to say, I rule everything else out of my life. I didn't always, but I do now."

When we first started these interviews, in late winter, Roth told me he was "between books" and was thinking about what might follow "The Human Stain." A couple of months later, he was kidding around about long-ago Newark and said, "I was born before panty hose and frozen foods." And then he added, "That's a line from my next novel." It turned out that he had written over a hundred pages. At that moment, he recalled the fleeting period in an athlete's life when the vectors of his physical abilities and his mastery of the game—his experience, intelligence, and imagination—meet at the highest possible point. Although "Sabbath's Theater," "American Pastoral," "I Married a Communist," and "The Human Stain" are all novels set on the abyss, all of them shot through with the comedy of failure and decay, the sense of exhilaration in

their author is unmistakable.

“I have to tell you that I don’t believe in death, I don’t experience the time as limited. I know it is, but I don’t feel it,” Roth said. “I could live three hours or I could live thirty years, I don’t know. Time doesn’t prey upon my mind. It should, but it doesn’t. I don’t know yet what this will all add up to, and it no longer matters, because there’s no stopping. And this stuff is not going to matter anyway, as we know. So there’s no sense even contemplating it, you know? All you want to do is the obvious. Just get it right, and the rest is the human comedy: the evaluations, the lists, the crappy articles, the insults, the praise.

“I want only to respond to my work. I don’t want to respond to all that stuff. It’s not important. It was, and it is for others at a certain time, but it can’t be important anymore.

“If I’m healthy and strong and writing every day, who cares? Whatever problem is raised for me by what I’m writing, I think, Don’t worry about it, all it takes is time. That’s all it takes. I don’t worry anymore that I don’t have what it takes to solve the problem. There are no interruptions, and I’ve got all the time in the world. Time is on my side.” ♦

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