Of all Philip Roth’s novels, The Counterlife (1986) is perhaps his most pivotal. Read within the context of his oeuvre, it occupies a curious and highly revealing place in the author’s literary trajectory. The novel is significant for several reasons. First, when it was written it was the most intricate and experimental (and postmodern) work Roth had ever created, especially in terms of (re)writing the self. He had attempted something like this in My Life As a Man (1974), but the textual ambitions of this exploration in The Counterlife make the earlier text pale by comparison. Second, it is the novel that temporarily suspends Roth’s most significant narrative voice, Nathan Zuckerman (at one point in the novel he dies), and largely paves the way for Roth’s next four contributions, the autobiographical works. As he does later in such texts as The Facts (1988) and Operation Shylock (1993), Roth explores the possibilities of the writer (in this case Zuckerman) recreating himself through a series of deceptive reinventions. Also, it is Roth’s first novel to be set, at least partially, in Israel. Alexander Portnoy visits the country in Portnoy’s Complaint (1969), but his stay is brief and, compared to the sojourn of Nathan and his brother, Henry, does not function as a significant determinant of self.
Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the novel foregrounds a desire to understand the Jewish ethnic self, a theme that permeates the entire novel. Although Roth had been concerned with Jewishness in earlier works, there was not the overriding need for the male subject (whether Portnoy, Gabe Wallach, Peter Tarnopol, or David Kepesh) to find his place within the larger ethnic community, in either Israel or America, and define himself in relation to it. If anything, the ethnic subject attempted to turn away from his community, as is the case with Portnoy. And even when the protagonist undertook a journey back toward his ethnic home, as Neil Klugman does in *Goodbye, Columbus* (1989), the act was performed on a more limited personal scale, ignoring issues of history. In *The Counterlife*, however, Zuckerman gravitates toward his ethnic roots in his native United States, in England, and most certainly in the Israeli homeland, a territory that Zuckerman's English wife, Maria, refers to as "the Jewish heart of darkness" (263). For these reasons, it is reasonable to consider the novel as the starting point in Roth's exploration of postmodern ethnicity. It is his first work to take on fully the ethnic self and to do so within the boundaries of postmodernism.

The critical consensus is that *The Counterlife* marks a turning point in Roth's career. The novel has received particular attention in light of its focus on issues surrounding identity and the ways in which the self is inscribed. For example, Brian Finney reads *The Counterlife* as a prelude to Roth's "autobiography," *The Facts*, an exercise demonstrating that the text of a life (or in other words, the inscription of identity) can only be rendered in relation to other textual lives. Focusing more on issues of Jewishness, Sylvia Barack Fishman argues that the novel is part of Roth's dialectical questioning of ethnic authenticity. Although privileging *Operation Shylock* as a more ambitious work, she nonetheless sees *The Counterlife's* significance as based on the fundamental question, What defines a contemporary Jew? (133) Debra Shostak, in her astute reading of the novel, approaches Roth's text as a speculative narrative underscoring the fluidity of identity. She believes that the novel's strength lies in the fact that it never falls prey to the metafictional nihilism embedded in many other contemporary narratives, and instead "challenges us to transcend the anxiety of the interpretive act, to embrace and be liberated by the duplicity of reality itself and not merely the duplicity of language" (199). Such readings underscore the centrality of this experi-
mental text within Roth's larger narrative project. However, the significance of *The Counterlife* lies not solely in its thematic investigations into Jewish ethnicity or its postmodern and metafictional structure, but in the combination of the two: its use of narrative labyrinths in articulating the construction of a postmodern Jewish-American identity.

*The Counterlife* is indeed a transitional novel, one that bridges the Zuckerman tetralogy preceding it with the "Philip Roth" tetralogy that follows. In the latter autobiographical tetralogy, Philip Roth the writer creates Philip Roth the character and by doing so emphasizes the authorial process of inscribing and defining the self. For instance, in *Operation Shylock*, which is perhaps the most significant of the autobiographical pieces and which professes to be a true confession, Roth ironically confronts his subject matter through what he calls at one point "fiction that, like so much of fiction, provides the storyteller with the lie through which to expose his unspeakable truth" (58). His "unspeakable truth" (whether it is of the Holocaust, the profound effects of Zionism, the benefits and costs of the Diaspora, the place of the Jew in both assimilated and non-assimilated communities, or the very fragmented and decentered nature of ethnic identity itself) is best revealed through a "lie," and in this case the lie is the text of *Operation Shylock.* The same thing happens in *The Counterlife*, but in this case the author who performs the inscription is himself a fictional creation, making the novel a sort of trial run for what Roth will do next. In it, Nathan Zuckerman creates a series of textual scenarios where each representation of his life is different from the others. At times the differences are slight, at other times profound. In every case, Zuckerman's attempt to rewrite the self becomes an effort at understanding the self, especially in relation to his Jewishness. As he writes to his younger brother, Henry, at one point during the latter's search for his Jewish roots, "the construction of a counterlife [...] is one's own anti-myth at its very core" (147).

These counterlives take the form of five chapters, each one representing both a shift in physical setting and a transition in ethnic understanding. The first chapter, "Basel," takes place in the United States and concerns the death of Henry Zuckerman, a socially comfortable upper-middle class dentist. He is having an affair with his dental assistant, but the beta-blockers he is taking leave him impotent. In his desire to prove himself still sexually vigorous, he undergoes a bypass operation, which
ultimately fails. The second chapter, "Judea," is the longest section in the book and revisits the life of Henry. This time he survives the operation and on a recuperative vacation in Israel, undergoes a religious crisis, abandons his family, and falls under the spell of a right-wing Zionist, Mordecai Lippman. Nathan flies to Israel and tries unsuccessfully to convince Henry to return home. The shortest chapter of the novel, "Aloft," finds Nathan on a plane returning home from Israel and inadvertently getting involved in a hijacking attempt. "Gloucestershire" is the text's most complex section. Here it is Nathan Zuckerman, not Henry, who has the bypass surgery (for similar sexual reasons) and dies, and it is the younger brother who comes to his funeral and then rumbles around the dead writer's apartment for potentially incriminating notes on an affair he, Henry, once had. In this chapter, the story of Nathan's funeral is bracketed by two other narratives: the first, a fragment of Zuckerman's own fiction regarding his impotence and desire for surgery, and the second, an entirely dialogue-based conversation, as in Deception: A Novel (1990), between the dead Zuckerman and the lover who was the reason for his choice of the operation. The last chapter, "Christendom," takes place in England where Zuckerman (not dead) and his pregnant wife, Maria, have their home. There he laments the genteel English form of anti-Semitism he witnesses, and this experience causes a fight between the two. In a letter to her husband inserted near the end of the novel, Maria expresses her intentions not only of leaving Zuckerman, but also, in a metafictional gesture, of exiting the very text that the reader is holding.

The structure of The Counterlife is quite confusing on first encounter. If readers expect a linear narrative, the form of most of Roth’s previous novels, they will be sorely frustrated. Every attempt at ferreting out a clear story from the labyrinthine plot proves futile. When Henry visits his dead brother's apartment after the funeral in "Gloucestershire," he finds in a box three chapters of an untitled manuscript Zuckerman had been working on, "Basel," "Judea," and "Christendom." Even though Henry's death and trip to Israel are treated as fictions in this chapter, Henry is appalled at the fact that his brother not only accurately chronicled his adulterous affairs, but used real names, masking nothing (much like Zuckerman's author, Roth, will do in the "autobiographical" works that follow The Counterlife). In order to protect himself, fearing that some future biographer will come along and release these unfin-

ished writings, Henry destroys the first two chapters, leaving only "Christendom." The "Gloucestershire" chapter could possibly give us a clue as to how to reconstruct the novel. The events in the three chapters that Henry peruses correspond exactly to what readers of *The Counterlife* have encountered. Since Zuckerman has died by the fourth chapter, we might assume that the three chapters Henry finds are what Zuckerman wrote prior to his death. However, there are questions that arise with this exercise in exegesis. First, there is never any mention of Henry finding the "Aloft" chapter, which could suggest an intentional act of narrative disruption on Roth's part. If facts change in Zuckerman's texts, why not in his author's? Second, if indeed Henry destroyed the first two chapters, how is it that readers can hold them in their hands? Lastly, the reader may be at a loss to explain the "Gloucestershire" chapter, especially its frames of Zuckerman's account of his own impotence and the "ghostly" dialogue that follows Henry's destruction of the text. The chapter's concluding conversation is particularly interesting in that the reader is never sure who is doing the conversing. The female voice appears to be that of the woman with whom Zuckerman had an affair, but the male voice refers to her lover in the third person, so it is unlikely that at this point Zuckerman has reentered the text—or if he has, then for curious reasons he prefers to speak of himself in a detached and objectified manner (again, as Roth does of "Roth" in the autobiographical tetralogy). It is as if here, immediately before the final chapter, Philip Roth has entered the text and is questioning the woman on how she feels about the death of Zuckerman in particular and about the novel in general. And if this is the case, where does the actual author's presence fit into this portion of the text, if at all?

The answers to these questions are at best ambiguous, at worst unavailable. After supposedly having died, Zuckerman appears to "reassert" himself by problematizing our interpretation of his text, the unfinished manuscript. The events in *The Counterlife* continuously turn back on themselves, making the book something of a Möbius strip. Throughout the novel, characters constantly reinvent themselves and each other—as Zuckerman says at one point, "we are all the inventions of each other, everybody a conjuration conjuring up everyone else" (145). One, Maria, refuses to be a part of the narrative game-playing anymore and threatens to leave the book. Episodes involving one person in one chapter
involve someone else in another. Events that occur in one part, such as the hijacking of the El Al flight, seem later never to have happened. There are even moments in the novel where references to events in other sections of the novel correspond—in a metafictional manner—to other places in the text, and with exact page numbers. 4 This being the case, Roth, the author of Zuckerman, is suggesting that a literal text is very much like the "text" of the self, a multifaceted and non-linear project that is always ongoing. What is more, the inscription of the self, both on the page and in the larger metaphorical sense, never occurs in isolation but is influenced by as well as against the expectations and desires of others. In light of all these textual ambiguities, it may seem misguided to look for any one elucidating passage in the book, but toward the end of the novel Zuckerman does express a sentiment that might provide a key to our interpretation of identity as well as of the text. In trying to explain his feelings to Maria, at this point his wife, he says the following: "The burden isn't either/or, consciously choosing from possibilities equally difficult and regrettable—it's and/and/and/and/and as well. Life is and: the accidental and the immutable, the elusive and the graspable, the bizarre and the predictable, the actual and the potential, all the multiplying realities, entangled, overlapping, colliding, conjoined—plus the multiplying illusions! This times this times this times this . . . " (306). In one interview, Roth himself voiced similar sentiments when asked about his conception of The Counterlife. He called it "a book of contradictory yet mutually entangled narratives [where] the reader has the sensation from chapter to chapter of the rug being tugged from under him." He goes on to say that The Counterlife for him was "a laboratory in which [he ran] a series of fictional experiments about what things would be like if" ("Philip Roth" 199). What Roth is suggesting here, in both fiction and nonfiction, is a postmodern approach to interpreting the construction of texts and identity. It is significant that in Zuckerman's quotation from The Counterlife there are five repetitions of "and," one for each chapter of the book. If indeed Zuckerman dies without completing his novel, obviously unable to insert the forth chapter, is the appearance of five "ands" merely a coincidence? 5 As Roth suggests in his interview he does not require that we definitively answer the question, just as he does not expect us to determine the real Zuckerman and that character's real connections to his author. In a further step, three years later and with the publication of
Deception, Roth takes these issues to another level. He has his protagonist, named Philip Roth, discuss with his wife the "death" of Nathan Zuckerman, and with his former English lover he comments on the novel he has just written, one that sounds almost exactly like The Counterlife. The introduction of "Philip Roth" as the author of Zuckerman is another narrative turn of the screw and further convolutes the relationship between writer and text. Yet in a novel so thematically devoted to the (re)writing of the self, Roth is not only challenging us as to how we understand the ways in which Zuckerman creates his own identity through his own writing, but also—and perhaps more importantly—how the actual author recreates himself through Zuckerman.

Such novelistic sophistication, with its emphases on narratology, metafiction, and questions of autobiography, provided Roth with a high point in his career, and that in itself is enough to give special attention to The Counterlife. Nonetheless, other contemporary writers such as Vladimir Nabokov, John Barth, Robert Coover, and John Hawkes had been engaging in such literary games for years. What makes The Counterlife so significant in American letters is that it does not emphasize postmodern narrative play for its own sake. Such maneuvers, outside of being nothing new, could tend to border on a fictional solipsism that is disengaged not only from the immediate unwritten world but also from history itself. Roth once stated that "Sheer Playfulness and Deadly Seriousness are my closest friends" ("Conversation with Roth" 98), and in The Counterlife he anchors his literary playfulness in Jewish ethnic issues. Not only does Roth explore the place of the American Jew as it relates to his own personal experiences, he also examines American Jewishness within contexts beyond these shores, specifically in Israel and England. Unlike earlier novels where he set his sights almost exclusively on New Jersey or New York, here Roth's sweep is more ambitious. And unlike other novels, such as The Professor of Desire (1977) and The Prague Orgy (1985), where the protagonists undergo meaningful experiences abroad, this one does not focus on Eastern Europe or Kafka. For the first time Roth engages in a dialogue between Diaspora Jews and Zionists and voices differences within each group.

Such is part of the dialogic nature of the narrative. The presence of Israel in The Counterlife is particularly significant in that since its creation in 1948, it has been in an ongoing process of defining itself, and, more
significant to Roth, American Jews in varying ways have been trying to define their own relationship to Judaism within the context of the Jewish state. As Zuckerman notes of Israel at one point, it is "a whole country imagining itself, asking itself, 'What the hell is this business of being a Jew?'" (145) The question of what it means to be a Jew lies at the heart of the novel. And in attempting to answer this question Roth employs a cacophony of voices, competing and dialogic in the Bakhtinian sense. There is of course the voice of Zuckerman, the American Jew who is comfortable in Diaspora, as well as the voices of his brother Henry, who makes aliyah and becomes a staunch Zionist; Shuki, the left-wing Israeli journalist who is suspicious of Jewish zealotry; Shuki's father, an Israeli loyalist; Mordecai Lippman and his followers, ultra-Zionists suspicious of all Arabs; Jimmy Ben-Joseph, the unstable American Jew who travels to Israel and turns hijacker; the El Al security agent, whose tough-minded pragmatism counterbalances Jimmy's "flights" of fancy; Maria, Zuckerman's English wife who is as put off by Anglo anti-Semitism as she is with her husband's paranoia about it; Maria's mother, in many ways the representative of genteel anti-Semitism; and Maria's sister, Sarah, who is subtly antagonistic in her anti-Semitism. Many of these voices—and these are not all—not only clash, but at times they shift and become counter-voices of themselves.

One way of reading the text's many expressions of ethnic debate is to map out the physical settings of all of the five chapters and the actions that occur in each. The novel begins in the United States, moves on to Israel, next becomes airborne, then comes back to the United States, and finally settles in England. Such a structure is not without significance. The United States as a setting appears twice, each time followed by a movement to another country that has meaning to the American Jew. Furthermore, in chapters 1 and 4 there is a death (of Henry and of Zuckerman, respectively) and a eulogy, followed in the next chapters by a reappearance, or "rebirth," of the dead character. In Zuckerman's representation of his brother's condition, Henry becomes fictionally resurrected in the biblical home of the Jews where he commits himself to Zionism, a mindset of which his brother is highly critical. After Zuckerman's own death in "Gloucestshire," he becomes reborn in England where the perception of anti-Semitism ironically brings him closer to issues of Jewishness. The opinions and arguments expressed in these sections provide the means by which Roth carries out his ethnic dialogue.
The context of Israel is important because in the opinion of many Israelis, American Jews have assimilated too much and have lost their roots. When he first arrives in Tel Aviv, Zuckerman recalls his previous trip there when he met the father of his friend, Shuki Elchanan. Elchanan père cannot understand why any Jew would not want to live in Israel, and debates this with Zuckerman. "We are living in a Jewish theater," Elchanan tells Zuckerman, "and you are living in a Jewish museum!" (52) Here Shuki’s father, by reading a static and death-like quality into the American Jew, is inverting an assumption that Zuckerman has always carried: that the dynamic Jew is one that can negotiate both his ethnicity and the secular culture at large. On his present trip, however, Zuckerman’s assumptions are more critically scrutinized, this time by Henry’s new guru, Mordecai Lippman. When he travels to Agor in Judea to see his brother, Zuckerman is lectured to by several of Lippman’s ultra-Zionist followers, including Henry, now going by the Hebrew name of Hanoch. One woman argues that with assimilation and intermarriage, "in America they are bringing about a second Holocaust—truly, a spiritual Holocaust is taking place there, and it is as deadly as any threat posed by the Arabs to the State of Israel. What Hitler couldn’t achieve with Auschwitz, American Jews are doing to themselves in the bedroom" (103). The debate later reaches almost fever pitch when Lippman articulates his paranoid theories about how the Goy will use the Black to wipe out the Jew, then turn around and use that as an excuse to destroy the Black. These references to the Holocaust linguistically clothed in the garb of assimilation disturbs Zuckerman, for he states at one point that he feels like a "[d]iaspora straight man—in some local production of Jewish street theater" (101). Later, with his same sense of irony, he attempts to neutralize Lippman’s loquacious zealotry by describing him as "some majestic Harpo Marx—Harpo as Hannibal [but] hardly mute" (115). (The combined themes of holocaust, Israel, assimilation, and identity—along with a bit of Jewish comedy—serve Roth once again in Operation Shylock. In that text Moishe Pipik, the imposter Philip Roth, works to convince Israelis that if European Jews aren’t soon living back in diaspora, the Arab-Israeli tensions will lead to catastrophic war, resulting either in another Jewish holocaust or in Israel using nuclear weapons on its neighbors, which in itself would result in a moral holocaust.)
Yet as uncomfortable as Zuckerman is in the kibbutz at Agor, there is something there that he cannot dismiss: the dedication of the Jews to recreating themselves. After being verbally bombarded by the charismatic leader, Zuckerman admits to himself that he finds Lippman's arguments of nation creation not completely unpersuasive. What is more, after talking with his brother, he ponders, "What purpose is hidden in what [Henry] now calls 'Jew'—or is 'Jew' just something he now hides behind? He tells me that here he is essential, he belongs, he fits in—but isn’t it more likely that what he has finally found is the unchallengeable means to escape his hedged-in life?" (119) Indeed, the exchanges between Zuckerman and Henry/Hanoch are central to the "Judea" chapter of the novel. The writer cannot understand his brother’s need to uproot himself completely, and he as an American Jew stands for the benefits of assimilation. For Zuckerman, the Promised Land is not rooted in the Pentateuch, but is defined as a function of his integrated life in America where he can appreciate existence more on his own terms:

My landscape wasn’t the Negev wilderness, or the Galilean hills, or the coastal plain of ancient Philistia; it was industrial, immigrant America. [. . .] My sacred text wasn’t the Bible but novels translated from Russian, German, and French into the language in which I was beginning to write and publish my own fiction—not the semantic range of classical Hebrew but the jumpy beat of American English was what excited me. (53)

For Henry, however, such a conception of what it means to be a Jew is narrow, if not downright dangerous to Jewish existence. He admonishes his brother for believing that his ethnic frame of reference is only "slightly larger than the kitchen table in Newark" (138), and accuses him of putting the individual above the tribe. Henry argues that as an assimilated Jew, who wholeheartedly buys into the ideas of American self-determination, and as a writer, who works solely within the confines of his own head and his own purposes, Zuckerman is nothing but a walking ego who cares nothing about his own people. When confronted with his own individuality, Henry replies, "The hell with me, forget me. Me is somebody I have forgotten. Me no longer exists out here. There isn’t time for me, there isn’t need of me—here Judea counts, not me!" (105) Through the voice of Henry, Roth is making the argument for the importance of
history and collective determination, while with Zuckerman the focus is on the freedom of the subject to create himself. It becomes a tug-of-war between the centripetal pull of the ethnic community and the centrifugal yearning for self expression, or what Werner Sollors calls the clash between relations of descent and relations of consent. Descent relations are those that emphasize "our positions as heirs, our hereditary qualities, liabilities, and entitlements." Consent relations, on the other hand, stress "our abilities as mature free agents and ‘architects of our fates’ to choose our spouses, our destinies, and our political systems" (Sollors 6). The relationship between Henry and Nathan, then, becomes a dialogue or a negotiation between these two forces, the tension of which reveals to the reader the particular rites and rituals of American ethnics, or as Sollors puts it, "the central codes of Americanness" (8). Neither is completely privileged, but then neither is completely discounted. Yet it is also important to keep in mind that, according to the self-reflexive narrative structure that Roth establishes, the voice of Henry is the voice of Zuckerman. As we learn (or assume we learn) in "Gloucestershire," Zuckerman has placed his own physical circumstance within the context of Henry, the latter never having retreated to Israel. And if "Henry" (as well as the voices of all the others in the "Judea" chapter) is Zuckerman rewritten into a counterlife, then the author’s alternative inscription becomes an act of writing the ethnic self, an exploration of the multiple possibilities of what it means to be a Jew.

The same thing occurs within the context of the final chapter that takes place in England. If Israel is represented as a space where the American Jew is not Jewish enough, then England represents the opposite, a place where American Jews can possibly be seen as too Jewish. Just as Henry attempts to escape his bourgeois family life and turn himself into Hanoch of Judea, Zuckerman pursues the opposite, or counter, path. He longs to trade in his tumultuous unanchored life as a writer for a pregnant, Christian-born wife and a home in the peaceful English countryside. The events in the final chapter of the novel, "Christendom," take place after he has returned from Israel and two weeks before Christmas. Feeling that he needs to be a part of his wife Maria’s family, Zuckerman consents to accompany them to a pre-holiday church service. Among the music, the beautiful flowers, the young boys wearing regimental ties, and the Christmas tree, he not only feels like an outsider, but an outsider
with curious thoughts about his own ethnic roots: "It never fails. I am never more of a Jew than I am in a church when the organ begins. I may be estranged at the Wailing Wall but without being a stranger—I stand outside but not shut out, and even the most ludicrous or hopeless encounter serves to gauge, rather than to sever, my affiliation with people I couldn't be less like" (256). This feeling of not belonging recurs after the service when he encounters the subtle anti-Semitic snobbery of Maria's mother and her sister, Sarah.

Zuckerman's growing distaste for this prejudice is exacerbated when later that evening he takes Maria out to a nice restaurant for her birthday, and there is affronted by an older couple who, in a passive-aggressive manner, express their annoyance at having to be in the same room as a Jew (this is at any rate how Zuckerman interprets their actions). Their comments on the unpleasant smell in the dining room, suggest, at least to Zuckerman, the notion of the "dirty" Jew as well as reference a stereotypical Jewish facial feature—"They smell so funny, don't they?" the woman asks her doddering husband (292). Although Maria is likewise incensed, the episode leads to a blow-up between her and Zuckerman. She accuses Zuckerman of seeing everything from a Jewish context, and he counters in similar manner: "Talk about Jewish tribalism. What is this insistence on homogeneity but a not very subtle form of English tribalism? What's so intolerable about tolerating a few differences?" (301) This charge is significant because while in Israel he had accused Henry of engaging in a similar sort of tribalism, although in the latter case it is a type prescribed from within the ethnic community. In light of this, Maria's countercharge is particularly biting. "Inside your head," she argues, "there is really no great difference between you and that Mordecai Lippman! Your brother's off his rocker? You are your brother!" (304) Within the context of Zuckerman's authorship of the chapters, she's right. And, as in the case with Henry at Agor, if the reader assumes that Zuckerman composes the voice of Maria, the above passages could be read as another instance of the author manipulating competing voices for the sake of understanding his own Jewishness.

Zuckerman, then, is poised between two poles, the Israeli and the English, what he calls "The Promised Land versus the Green Tweed Suit" (196). Both allow him a means by which to define himself along with as well as against the cultures. One is representative of his ethnic roots, yet
potentially too restrictive in his acting upon those roots; the other allows him the freedom to venture beyond his ethnic identity, while at the same time possibly denying that identity. In interpreting *The Counterlife*, then, the question becomes, to which pole does Zuckerman gravitate? If the novel is structured geographically, as I posit, then one such answer may lie in the third chapter of the book. As the middle chapter, it literally comprises the center of the novel, in many ways a privileged location in such a meticulously structured text. Even if the chapter's literal centeredness is nothing more than a coincidence, "Aloft" is nonetheless significant in that it links both the US/abroad sections at either end of the text. What is more, it is the only chapter not to be located in any country but rather on an airplane suspended, one could argue, in a state of intermediateness between Tel Aviv and London. "Aloft," then, is a transition point that foregrounds the dilemma in Zuckerman's sense of ethnic definition.

By the time he is on the El Al London flight, Zuckerman is not completely comfortable with either the life of his brother in Israel or his own life in England. True, he has made a decision to reside in the latter with his new wife, but his suspicion of anti-Semitism is growing (immediately before leaving England to see Henry, Zuckerman attends a dinner party where the largely liberal guests bash Israel and drop subtle innuendoes disparaging Jewry in general). In the middle of composing two letters, one to his brother and one to Shuki—opposite ends on the Israeli spectrum—Zuckerman is interrupted by Jimmy Ben-Joseph, formerly Lustig of the West Orange Lustigs. A couple of days previously, as narrated in "Judea," the author had met him while visiting the Western Wall. A tall, young American man with a hint of the schizoid, Jimmy is both a rabid fan of Zuckerman's fiction and a devotee of baseball. Enamoured of this all-American sport, he looks forward to someday playing for the Jerusalem Giants for, as he tells the visiting author, "Not until there is baseball in Israel will Messiah come!" (94) He is described in terms that express both excited innocence and manic flightiness, suggested in the name that Zuckerman gives him, "Jimmy the Luftyid, the High-Flying Jew" (93). Ironically enough, his statement foreshadows what he will experience while in flight, for when Zuckerman once again meets him, Jimmy is dressed as a yeshivah bucher and wearing a fake beard. (His choice of disguise could carry two meanings. A *bucher* is a devoted and scholarly yeshivah stu-
dent, and in Yiddish it is also used ironically to describe someone who is naïve and gullible.) He shows his literary hero a short manifesto, inspired he says by Nathan’s fiction, entitled "Forget Remembering!" In it, he calls for the abolition of all Holocaust remembrance museums on the grounds that a fixation on the past will only stagnate the Jewish cause. To make his point, he foolishly attempts to hijack the flight, getting both himself and Zuckerman in trouble in what becomes a rather seriocomic ending.

Jimmy’s place within the text is significant in that he embodies a variety of contradictions. He represents both the American and the Israeli sides of the Jewish experience, as the names Lustig and Ben-Joseph suggest. Similarly, at the Western Wall he runs, jumps, and screams as if playing baseball, almost hitting several of the worshippers. On the plane he is reading a Hebrew prayer book while eating candy bars, an unusual combination, as Zuckerman notes. One moment he wants to remain in Israel, and the next he is denouncing remembrance of the very history that helped give birth to the Jewish state. More important is his connection to Zuckerman, the creator of contradiction within the text. Jimmy knows everything about the writer, portraying the kind of unsettling hero-worship displayed by Alvin Pepler in Zuckerman Unbound (1981). “You’re a real father to me, Nathan,” Jimmy tells him in flight, "And not only to me—to a whole generation of pathetic fuck-ups. [. . .] I went around Israel feeling like your son” (169). And to complete this unlikely mirroring, Jimmy reveals that he too is a writer, author of the Five Books of Jimmy (we are never told what the five books—suggestive of the five chapters of The Counterlife?—are, but the absurdity of the title helps to underscore this unusual encounter). Zuckerman has once again "fathered" a countertext, one that not only places him between cultures but, significantly enough, gets him into serious trouble with Israeli security. As he is strip-searched while the plane heads back to Israel, Zuckerman fears that he is in for his share of "Jewish justice" (181).

It would seem that with Zuckerman’s plane returning to Tel Aviv, the protagonist due for some Jewish justice, Roth may be privileging the "Israeli" side of the Jewish issue. But such an assumption is undermined at the very beginning of the "Christendom" chapter, picking up where "Aloft" leaves off. Zuckerman mentions that the flight up from Tel Aviv had been uneventful and quiet enough to allow him to think and take quite a few notes. So again, Roth presents one possibility one moment
and the next moment replaces it with its opposite. This functions along with the significance of the middle chapter, for everything in it suggests a state of suspension, a moment between possibilities. Yet in terms of defining the ethnic self, the desirability of this intermediacy is open-ended. Jimmy, a mixture of Jewish signifiers, is unstable and is ultimately the one who causes Zuckerman to be stripped, given a full cavity search (in light of his exploits in earlier novels, there may be some poetic just in that), and flown back to Israel. If "Aloft" serves not only as a linking chapter but, more importantly, as a third possibility for Zuckerman, one of straddling the fence, then it seems just as (un)promising as any within the text.

If neither assimilation, association, nor intermediacy provides the definitive answer, then perhaps it is the recognition and negotiation of all of these that provide a solution, no matter how tentative or fluid. Roth suggests as much in the last chapter. After Zuckerman’s argument with Maria, he is once again alone and begins to imagine himself with "no outer life of any meaning, myself completely otherless and reabsorbed within—all the voices once again only mine ventriloquizing, all the conflicts germinated by the tedious old clashing of contradictions within" (311). If we enter Roth's narrative vertiginousness and assume Zuckerman to be the creator within the creation, creating counterlives, then here we are left with an author (both Zuckerman and Roth) hinting at the foundations of his project.

This becomes clearer in the last several pages. Roth ends the novel by having his protagonist engage in combining a series of imagined letters, similar to the creative mind games he has his characters experience in The Ghost Writer (1985) and American Pastoral (1997) (the word "imagined" appears several times throughout the last chapter). It is tempting to see these letters as actual components within the physical action of the story, composed by the characters themselves, but as he does in so much of his work, Roth deceives the unwary reader into believing something has happened when in fact it has not—which in many ways underscores the literary power of The Counterlife. Having walked out on Maria and worried that the marriage will not survive, Zuckerman wonders how a goodbye letter from his wife would begin: "I'm leaving. I've left. I'm leaving you. I'm leaving the book," to which then he asserts, "That's it. Of course. The book! She conceives of herself as my fabrication, brands herself a fantasy and cleverly absconds, leaving not just me but a promis-
ing novel of cultural warfare barely written but for the happy beginning (312). And indeed, the very first words of her imagined goodbye letter correspond exactly to his supposition. In yet another fictional twist, Zuckerman (a character in his own story) creates a letter from Maria stating her dissatisfaction at being someone else’s invention. She states that she is dissatisfied with the name she’s been given and finds her character the least credible in the novel. And in an act of fictional rebellion, she announces, “You want to play reality-shift? Get yourself another girl. I’m leaving” (318). While one might be tempted to read in Maria’s dramatic exit an assertion of feminine power, a rare commodity in Roth’s fiction, it is important to keep in mind that it is Zuckerman creating this scenario. Nonetheless, hers is one of the many voices he uses to understand himself, and as such plays a significant role.

Maria’s voice serves as an occasion for another imagined letter, this time to her from Zuckerman, and the author uses this opportunity to drive home his narrative philosophy. It is one that his creator, Philip Roth, has followed for most of his career, especially when critics play the game of Find-the-Real-Roth. Zuckerman states, “Being Zuckerman is one long performance and the very opposite of what is thought of as being oneself. In fact, those who most seem to be themselves appear to me people impersonating what they think they might like to be, believe they ought to be, or wish to be taken to be by whoever is setting standards” (319).

This notion of self as performance permeates Roth’s later fiction and can be read in different ways. On the one hand this unmoored series of constructions can be liberating, allowing one the choice of observing the laws and traditions of a particular ethnic community. Henry, never a practicing Jew while in New Jersey, finds comfort and purpose in defining himself through Orthodox Judaism in Agor. The authenticity of his dedication to religious faith, which Zuckerman questions at one point, is not the issue. In terms of postmodernism, notions of ethnic authenticity are always suspect. The subject can create a system, as opposed to possessing a core, upon which to base self-definition and live by that. This can be highly constructive to our culture, as bell hooks has pointed out. She has attempted to define a postmodern ethnicity by contextualizing one particular ethnic group and configuring an abstracted model of what a postmodern reading of ethnicity might look like. She explores the intersection of race and postmodernism and expresses a wariness of the
essentializing dangers underlying certain ethnic or race theories. A politics of difference, hooks argues, can turn repressive when rooted in those master narratives from which marginal subjects have attempted to free themselves. In other words, the search for some "authentic" black identity not only assumes a highly problematic "modernist" point of origin, but perhaps more importantly silences the vast multiplicity of expressions that broadly defines the black experience in America. hooks's critique has strong political implications that extend beyond the African-American community. Instead of an ethnic or race theory that centralizes the cultural law of the tribe, she calls for critical strategies that foreground psychological states common to a variety of marginalized subjects. A "radical postmodernism," she believes, should focus on those "shared sensibilities which cross the boundaries of class, gender, race, etc., that could be fertile ground for the construction of empathy—ties that would promote recognition of common commitment, and serve as a base for solidarity and coalition" (27).

Yet despite the positive results for society, there is nonetheless a disturbing sense of individual emptiness and nihilism suggested by this conception, as when Zuckerman writes to Maria, "All I can tell you with certainty is that I, for one, have no self, and that I am unwilling or unable to perpetrate upon myself the joke of a self. [. . .] I am a theater and nothing more than a theater" (320–21). Zuckerman himself suspects that this might be going too far and calls it "tipping over the edge" (321). It anticipates the emotional breakdown—disintegration, he calls it—that the character Philip Roth undergoes in The Facts and Operation Shylock. However, Roth the writer responds to potential charges of nihilism when he has Zuckerman write in a follow-up, "But it is INTERESTING trying to get a handle on one's own subjectivity—something to think about, to play around with, and what's more fun than that?" (321) By "fun," Roth is not suggesting that the process of writing the self is nothing more than sheer playfulness detached from any life or responsibility. As stated earlier, his focus is not on the "pure" game of metafiction played exclusively within the bound covers of a text. Such an orientation would suggest a literary pastoral, an ideal intellectual world without complications, similar to the kind of life that Zuckerman had desired in England. But as Maria warns her husband, "the pastoral is not your genre" (317). Again, geographic location is used to highlight fictional strategy.
comes to realize this when he admits to Maria in his imagined letter to her; "How moving and pathetic these pastorals are that cannot admit contradiction and conflict! That that is the womb and this is the world is not as easy to grasp as one might imagine" (322). The complications of life, as well as the complications of narrative, may be burdensome but are nonetheless necessary to conceptions of self.

In *The Counterlife*, these contradictions and conflicts take form, not only in technique, but more significantly in the question of what it means to be a Jew. Along with the text’s migrations between America, England, and Israel, Roth explores the issue of Jewish identity by making a metaphor of that which has long been associated with him: the penis. Yet unlike the way the penis was discussed in *Portnoy’s Complaint*, here the organ becomes a source of ethnic identification. References to the penis as a symbol of Jewishness can be found throughout the text. Henry’s choice of sexual pleasure from his assistant, and his source of frustration, is fellatio; both Zuckerman and Henry at different times suffer from impotence due to their heart medicine, leading them to their unsuccessful attempts at bypass surgery; Zuckerman’s impotence could represent his inability to define solidly his Jewishness; Mordecai Lippman’s holstered gun functions as a symbol of Jewish machismo that intimidates the Arabs; and the question of circumcision becomes a point of contention between Zuckerman and Maria’s Christian family, who desire to have the yet-to-be-born child baptized rather than circumcised.

The latter is of particular importance in that circumcision manifests in flesh Abraham’s covenant with God, a religiously unifying custom, marking by sign the newborn’s identity as a Jew. As a father—to-be (at least in parts of the text), Zuckerman must consider this act of ethnic signification as a possibility if he and Maria have a son. The first time circumcision is mentioned is in Tel Aviv when Shuki and Zuckerman casually walk down Dizengoff Street. Shuki is questioning his friend on the possibility of conflict between Maria’s family and Jewish custom, but Zuckerman is almost nonchalant in his manner of dismissing the question. He even suggests that he would not mind it one way or the other. Later, after returning to the England that makes him feel more of a Jew, he undergoes a change of heart. In his letter to Maria, and in response to the pastoral question, Zuckerman admits that circumcision may be an irrational act, but then goes on to add:
Circumcision is startling, all right, particularly when performed by a garlicked old man upon the glory of a newborn baby, but then maybe that's what the Jews had in mind and what makes the act seem quintessentially Jewish and the mark of their reality. Circumcision makes it clear as can be that you are here and not there, that you are out and not in—also that you're mine and not theirs. There is no way around it: you enter history through my history and me. Circumcision is everything that the pastoral is not, to my mind, reinforces what the world is about, which isn't strifeless unity. (323)

This Jewish injunction becomes for Roth one of the central means by which he places his postmodern narrative within the context of his ethnicity. What is more, he goes on to link it, in an almost mischievous manner, to the narrative structure of the text. Zuckerman concludes his letter with a reference to his own erection, what he calls "the circumcised erection of the Jewish father," and recalls the first time Maria ever handled it. When asked what she thought of it, her first one circumcised, she replies that she likes it, "but it's the phenomenon itself: it just seems a rather rapid transition" (324). The text itself is filled with rapid transitions: identities changing, facts shifting, authors blurring, and passage from the written to the unwritten worlds becoming completely confusing. Roth also frames the novel with penis references; it opens with Henry's impotence and ends with Zuckerman's erection.

Such textual progression might suggest a narrative linear movement, but The Counterlife at almost every point undermines any pretense of linearity. The instability of the narrative likewise suggests the problematic nature of ethnic identity. Even though the text ends with a reference to a sacred Jewish ritual, Roth never brings himself, or his protagonist, to categorically accept any one foundational explanation of what it means to be an American Jew. Toward the end of the novel, Zuckerman describes himself this way: "A Jew without Jews, without Judaism, without Zionism, without Jewishness, without a temple or an army or even a pistol, a Jew clearly without a home, just the object itself, like a glass or an apple" (324). This enigmatic description lies at the heart of writing about one's identity, and it is reminiscent of the title that Roth considered giving his next book, The Facts: "Begging the Question." But for Roth, begging the question is what the self is all about. There's never an end,
but instead a deferred meaning, an always ongoing process. As a novelist, Roth can abandon the "I" to become any voice he chooses, as he has often done with a vengeance. The self is both pliable and fluid. However, in *The Counterlife*, Roth is keenly aware that history, specifically Jewish history, is not as malleable as the fictional whims of the author. By negotiating these two phenomena, the choice of identity and the responsibility to the tribe, Roth meets head-on the challenge to define the postmodern ethnic self.

**Notes**

1. Robert Alter, Joseph Cohen, Alan Cooper, Andrew Furman, William H. Gass, Eugene Goodheart, and Mark Shechner all note *The Counterlife* as a major shift for Roth in terms of both technique and thematic focus.

2. Regarding *Operation Shylock*, Roth claims to be committing a bit of Jewish mischief by embedding a "lie" within the "true" confessional nature of the novel. For a more thorough discussion of verisimilitude and its relation to the autobiographically inscribed ethnic subject, see Royal, "Texts, Lives, and Bellybuttons."

3. In this part of the "Gloucestershire" chapter, there's the question of to whom Maria is talking. It is not entirely clear whether it is the disembodied voice of the dead Nathan that is addressing Maria, or the "fictionalized" author, Roth, questioning his own creation about the story's plot turns. I will address this ambiguity later in the essay.

4. In "Gloucestershire" Henry refers to the actual beginning page number of "Christendom," and in Maria's letter in "Christendom," she refers by exact page number to an event that takes place earlier in "Judea."

5. And, one could go on to ask, might Zuckerman's novel, like that of Roth's, also be entitled *The Counterlife*? Given the Roth's penchant here for metafictional experimentation, such a question would not be out of place.

6. Here I refer to the fake Roth as "Moishe Pipik," Yiddish for Moses Bellybutton, to distinguish him from Philip Roth the living author and from the author's fictional creation, "Philip Roth." In *Operation Shylock*, the fictional "Roth" gives the imposter this nonsense name, one that ironically links the sacred Jewish figure with the most useless of anatomical marks.

7. If you only count the number of pages with written text, the "Aloft" chapter stands at the exact center of the book, only off by one page because
of the novel's even number of pages. In other words, there is almost exactly an equal number of pages both before and after this chapter.

8. Throughout the text Roth refers to the site by its alternate name, the Wailing Wall.

9. Those familiar with the popular analyses of Roth's novels will note the almost obsessive preoccupation reviewers demonstrate in trying to discover the "real" authorial presence within his narratives.

10. In an interview he playfully conducted with himself, Roth states, "In an odd way—maybe not so odd at that—I set myself the goal of becoming the writer some Jewish critics had been telling me I was all along: irresponsible, conscienceless, unserious. Ah, if only they knew what that entailed!" ("On the Great American Novel" 87)

Works Cited


