Chapter Two

Paying Attention to the Man behind the Curtain

Philip Roth and the Dynamics of Written and Unwritten Celebrity

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Outside of the occasional Ernest Hemingway- or Norman Mailer-type figures, most "serious" novelists abjure the glare of the popular spotlight. And Philip Roth is no exception. Over the past fifteen years, he has gained the reputation of an almost monastic author, someone who devotes himself to his writing at the expense of most outside contact. The popular narrative, nurtured by those interviews where he discusses his writing habits, is that since his divorce from Claire Bloom and his return to New York (as well as the neighboring Connecticut) in the early 1990s, Roth has been able to sustain his almost unprecedented string of award-winning literary successes—Sabbath's Theater (1995), American Pastoral (1997), I Married a Communist (1998), The Human Stain (2000), The Plot Against America (2004), and Everyman (2006)—through a highly disciplined, workmanlike regimen that leaves time for little else. Roth himself has even gone on record as abjuring the media spotlight, stating in (quasi-) autobiography, The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography (1988), that "I was educated to believe that the independent reality of the fiction is all there is of importance and that writers should remain in the shadows," and claiming that "I've refrained from nakedly divulging my personal life to (and pressing a TV personality on) a serious audience" (4). Taking Roth at his word, then, a celebrity—at least in our more popular understanding of the designation—he is not.
Yet, Roth is a literary celebrity, and this essay focuses on recent examples of him in the media, at times consciously orchestrated and at other times quite inadvertent. If we look at the history surrounding not only Roth’s fiction, but also at his personal life, we can see how he has used his celebrity status as the grist for his fiction and also how he has indirectly—and at times perhaps even purposefully—nurtured or encouraged the kind of media attention that goes with being a personality. As readers well know, most of Roth’s early notoriety came from his writing Portnoy’s Complaint (1969) and the kind of media frenzy generated from that. Even in the months leading up to the work’s publication—with provocative sections such as “A Jewish Patient Begins His Analysis” and “Whacking Off,” appearing in Esquire, American Review, and the Partisan Review—the soon-to-be novel was creating a buzz. In the 7 February 1969 issue of Life magazine, in anticipation of Portnoy’s publication, Albert Goldman wrote a profile of Roth and his new novel, appropriately titling his piece “Portnoy’s Complaint by Philip Roth Looms as a Wild Blue Shocker and the American Novel of the Sixties.” Such a statement was not an over-exaggeration, in that the novel did create a publicity tsunami, pulling in its wake a variety of gossip columnists, movie stars, television personalities, talk show hosts, discussion panels, and rabbis lamenting from the pulpit. Among the many phenomena generated by the publication of Portnoy’s Complaint are the novelist Jacqueline Susann’s now famous comments on Johnny Carson’s Tonight Show—when asked if she ever met Philip Roth, she said no, but she’d like to, and then added, “Of course, I would not like to shake his hand”—as well as Harvey Kurtzman and Will Elder’s comic strip Little Annie Fanny, appearing regularly in Playboy magazine, which featured in one installment a lecherous and sex-crazed figure by the name of Portnoy Alexander. Roth has said of his experiences after the publication of the novel, “In 1969, I wrote Portnoy. Not only did I write it—that was easy—I also became the author of Portnoy’s Complaint and what I faced publicly was the trivialisation of everything” (qtd. in Alvarez, 36). His comments about “becoming the author” are quite telling, suggesting his evolution into the kind of writer who is keenly aware of, and increasingly adept in confronting, the public gaze cast upon him. While the novelist may not have possessed the same kind of celebrity status as that achieved by movie or television stars, he took away from that cultural moment a unique kind of literary celebrity, one that very few writers have ever experienced.

Yet, focusing on a common conception of celebrity, that which we usually assign to media figures, fails to take into consideration the place of celebrity as a theme, celebrity as a cultural marker, and celebrity as a paratext—in Roth’s oeuvre. Indeed, his novels are filled with examples of renowned personalities, individuals whose presence is larger than life and whose exploits, heroic as well as suspect, garner wide public notice. Consid-
course of Roth's as well. And this status becomes something for Roth to possess so as to control the narrative of his own life. In this way, celebrity is not just something that is passively thrust upon an author, but grist for creativity and the potential means to manipulate audience perception.

Yet, for all of Roth's supposed privileging of the private life over the public, and for his declaration that “writers should remain in the shadows,” the novelist has engaged in his share of self-exposure and self-promotion, all of which encourages the kind of celebrity status that Roth and his narrative surrogates paradoxically claim to abhor. Brian D. Johnson has called Roth’s fiction “peekaboo narrative[s]” that exploit his personal intimacies, all of which provoke curiosity and lead to the kind of public speculation that accompanies popular iconography (Roth, “Intimate Affairs,” 256). Similarly, Joseph Epstein “wonders if voyeuristic kicks are not precisely at the heart of Roth’s recent novels [the first Zuckerman books],” and then, commenting on Roth’s negative reaction to reading autobiography into his fiction, he states that “if a writer doesn’t wish to supply such kicks, perhaps he would do better not to undress before windows opening onto thoroughfares” (64).

Even Roth’s commentary regarding his own fiction makes one question the novelist’s beliefs surrounding the “independent reality of the fiction.” In addition to the essays collected in Reading Myself and Others (1975)—e.g., “On Portnoy’s Complaint,” “How Did You Come to Write That Book, Anyway?,” and “On The Great American Novel” (an interview he conducted with himself)—and his relatively prolific history with interviewers, Roth attempts to guide our reading of his books and continues to provoke his readers in notable ways. In 1993, he erroneously claimed that the events in Operation Shylock actually happened. As he told Esther B. Fein, “The book is true... I’m not trying to confuse you... This actually happened. I stepped into a strange hole, which I don’t understand to this day... I made [all the earlier novels] up. And now when I tell the truth, [the critics] insist that I made it up. I tell them, ‘Well, how can I make it up since you’ve always said I am incapable of making anything up?’ I can’t win!” (“Believe Me,” B1-B2). Roth was equally mischievous in the days leading up to the publication of The Plot Against America. The book had created such a media stir with the suspicion that it was a novel lambasting the George W. Bush administration, that the author saw fit to set the reading public straight in the New York Times Book Review. Roth claimed that it would be a mistake “to take this book as a roman à clef to the present moment in America,” denying any political agenda in the text. But then he went on to contradict his stated intentions, calling George W. Bush “a man unfit to run a hardware store let alone a nation like this one, and who has merely reaffirmed for me the maxim that informed the writing of all these books and that makes our lives as Americans as precarious as anyone else’s” (12). For a writer who thinks that his books should speak for themselves, Roth has certainly engaged in his share of verbal exposure, telling us how we should read his fiction, and in the process, curiously perpetuating his own brand of celebrity.

At the same time, there is much about public exposure that not only confounds an author but also is completely out of his control. The survey that follows reveals recent instances where Roth’s press has dramatically outpaced his fiction. They cover a little over a three-year period, between January 2009 and March 2012, a time that witnessed a curious increase in Roth-related publicity. Indeed, if we exclude the ever-present book reviews that regularly appear upon the publication of every Roth novel—lately, a ritual that has become a yearly event—what’s notable is how much print Roth receives for matters having almost nothing to do with his literary talents. At times, it seems as if the machine of popular celebrity now rivals the impact of Roth’s own work.

Such a phenomenon should come as no surprise to those familiar with novelist’s critical musings. In his 1960s manifesto, “Writing American Fiction,” Roth takes a look at the place of writers in contemporary American society and evaluates their dilemma within that culture. He argues that reality has outpaced—and even out-fictionalized—fiction. Highlighting a couple of outrageous but nonetheless real news items, he concludes that:

the American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make credible much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one’s one meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist. (167-68)

These words now appear as a kind of foreshadowing, or foreboding, of the kind of events that would surround his own life not quite ten years later with the wild success of Portnoy’s Complaint. And if we’re to take the dilemma of Nathan Zuckerman in Zuckerman Unbound and Exit Ghost as any indication, this achievement brought the novelist the kind of notoriety that drove him from his Manhattan residence and into the seclusions of rural Connecticut.

Almost fifty years after Portnoy, there was another curious spike in Roth’s public reputation—albeit much more subdued and less threatening than the kind of dilemma threatening to overtake Zuckerman’s status as a serious writer. The year 2009 began, in fact, with a return to speculation on Roth’s infamous relationship with actress Claire Bloom. Writing in the blog Scholars & Rogues, Russ Wellen saw fit to revisit the troubled marriage, Bloom’s ill-fated memoir, Leaving a Doll’s House (1996), and Roth’s retaliatory salvo, I Married a Communist. The reasons for returning to this topic, Wellen states, is that for him, “[I]ts fascination lies in the incongruity of artists behaving like tabloid trash.” The novelist comes across in Wellen’s
piece as what Jennifer Senior has described as “a gleeful misogynist,” as well as a spiteful and selfish lover. What is notable about this article is that the description of Roth embodies the kind of notorious characteristics that had lately vanished from Roth’s public image, especially since the publication of The Plot Against America. Wellen describes the writing of I Married a Communist as an exercise in melodrama, and he concludes his piece by describing Roth as “petty, narcissistic, and vicious—unbecoming traits that could work to keep the perennial Nobel-Prize-for-literature candidate perennial.”

Four months later, Roth is briefly in the news for more compassionate reasons. That May, the Newark Preservation and Landmarks Committee presented Roth with the Charles Cumming Award for “making Newark’s past come alive for millions of readers” (Jackson). As reported in New Jersey papers and blogs, both Roth and the Broadway House for Continuing Care, an AIDS treatment center, received honors from the Preservation and Landmark Committee for their contributions to Newark History. The Newark Star-Ledger even made certain that their hometown hero was given all due accolades, noting that Summit Avenue, the street on which the novelist grew up, was renamed “Philip Roth Plaza” in 2005 (Adaro).

Over the summer of 2009, there appeared a number of stories on the fortieth anniversary of Portnoy’s Complaint, the text that really started it all when it came to making Roth a celebrity. Newspapers such as the Guardian—a publication that seemed particularly interested in Roth’s exploits during that year—touted the impact of the novel and how fresh it remains today. "Still Shocking at 40," ran the headline on their blog. The significance of the novel, the author argued, rests on the ways in which Roth connected sex and mortality as well as on the novel’s ability to transcend vulgarity, “using sex to explore pretty much everything else” (“Portnoy’s Complaint”). And Mary Beard, writing in her blog “The Don’s Life” for the London Times, speculated on a retrofitting of Portnoy’s Complaint into discussions of the 1969 Booker Prize...that is, had Portnoy’s Complaint been eligible for the Booker Prize (being an American author, it was not). In this alternate history, Roth’s novel was pitted against other 1969 publications that didn’t win the honors: Graham Greene’s Travels with my Aunt, John Fowles’s The French Lieutenant’s Woman, and Margaret Atwood’s The Edible Woman. This hypothetical exercise was part of Cheltenham Literary Festival’s Booker event. Beard, along with other Booker judges, cast their retrospective ballots, and Portnoy’s Complaint came out the winner...much to Beard’s chagrin.

Perhaps the strangest example Roth’s contemporary celebrity surfaced in June 2009 with the “Jewish Shouting Mix.” That previous year, James Marcus, a literary and music critic, interviewed Roth on the publication of Indignation (2008). During the interview, Marcus asked Roth what he thought of the film adaptations of his various novels. Roth called the film version of Portnoy’s Complaint “unspeakable,” primarily “a movie about shouting. Jewish shouting.” He then went on to give a short example of what this shouting might sound like, catching Marcus completely by surprise. As the interviewer put it, “[Roth] then proceeds to give a brief, comical example, which strikes me as a specimen of literary history, like Thoreau demonstrating how to peel the bark off a birch tree” (Roth, “Philip Roth, on Writing”). Marcus had recorded this uncharacteristic outburst, and later he isolated Roth’s shouts and laughter and put it to a funky, danceable beat. As Marcus indicates on his blog, House of Mirth, he posted the mix on Melville House, a website that is “always on the alert for booty-shaking literary artifacts” (“Roth: The Dance Mix”).

After uploading the impromptu dance mix, the track quickly went viral on the Web, and Marcus soon acquired his fifteen minutes of fame. The phenomenon surrounding “Jewish Shouting Mix 3” received coverage from newspapers and websites from around the world, including the New York Times, the Guardian, the National Post, Harper’s, Gawker, Tablet, For Zion’s Stake, HTML Giant, and Jewlicious, among others. The Guardian’s Alison Flood called the mix “the ringtone of choice among hip literary types this summer” (“Philip Roth Features”). Interviewed by the blog Flavorwire about this mini-craze, Marcus said about Roth’s outburst, “I found it very funny at the time, and even funnier when I listened to the MP3 file afterwards. Once I isolated the shouting, it was just a hop, skip, and a jump to the dance mix: the idea was irresistible. There was no wager, no commercial motive—just the desire to tinker with an historic bit of utulation” (“Exclusive”). It wasn’t long before word spread of a fifteen-minute version of the “Jewish Shouting Mix,” the reality of which Marcus predicted would be a “real nightmare—like extending a knock-knock joke for two hours” (“Exclusive”).

Again, one is reminded of Roth’s 1960 speculations on reality and its relation to fiction: “It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one’s one meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents.”

Roth’s star continued to crest throughout the remainder of 2009, in both likely and unlikely ways. In early October, the usual (and now annual) speculations on whether or not Roth would win the Nobel Prize for Literature, and then the resulting denouncements and outcries when he did not—“Roth Robbed of Nobel—Again,” read a typical headline (Mathis)—were particularly notable given the comments the previous year from Horace Engdahl, the permanent secretary of the Nobel Prize jury. He had said that “[i]n here is powerful literature in all big cultures, but you can’t get away from the fact that Europe still is the centre of the literary world...not the United States.” He added, “The U.S. is too isolated, too insular. They don’t translate enough and don’t really participate in the big dialogue of literature. That ignorance is
restraining” (Goldenberg). Although Engdahl was not specifically targeting Philip Roth in his comments, almost every story on his pronouncement specifically mentioned Roth and featured pictures of him along with the story. A couple of weeks later, Roth turns up in the news again, but this time the results are more uplifting. Newspapers and blogs from around the world ran the story of Roth’s unexpected presence on a tour of his hometown. On 17 October, the writer quietly stepped on the bus heading out for “Philip Roth’s Newark,” a tour, sponsored by the Newark Preservation and Landmarks Committee, of historic neighborhoods, buildings, and locales appearing in Roth’s various novels. Those taking part in that day’s excursion, graduates from Weequahic High School’s class of 1960 (and ten years Roth’s juniors), were both shocked and excited to be spending the day with the tour’s namesake. The Star-Ledger reported comments by tour members, “Omgod, are we excited!,” “If I had known, I would have brought my books for him to sign,” and even someone yelling to the novelist, “I have an empty seat!” And when the Weequahic High class of 1960 began singing their old fight song, immortalized in Portnoy’s Complaint—“Ikey, Mikey, Jake and Sam, we are the boys who eat no ham. We play football, we play soccer, we keep matzohs in our locker. Aye aye aye, Weequahic High!”—Roth sang right along (Dilorenzo). The presence of the world-famous and venerable author, walking nonchalantly onto a bus specifically devoted to a tour bearing his name and singing his old high school fight song, was almost too unbelievable for the press, and to paraphrase Roth in “Writing American Fiction,” it was another example of reality outdoing fiction.

Then in late October, Roth touched off a flurry of “death of the novel” speculations during an interview with Tina Brown for The Daily Beast. Talking with the novelist about his recently published The Humbling, lesbians with green dildos, and Roth’s style of composition, Brown then turned to questions about the status of fiction. When asked about the future of the novel, and an earlier comment by Roth that novels will not be read after the next twenty-five years, Roth responded, “I was being optimistic about twenty-five years really. No, I think it’s going to be cultic. I think always people will be reading them, but it’ll be a small group of people—maybe more people than now read Latin poetry, but somewhere in that range.” He then went on to explain how books cannot compete with the screen—the film screen, the television screen, the computer screen, the Kindle screen—and that few people possess a “devotion to the reading… that kind of concentration, and focus, and attentiveness” required of serious readers (“Philip Roth Unbound”). Again, newspapers around the world ran stories about Roth’s predictions about the near death of the novel, prompting reactions (and criticisms) from a variety of critics and authors, among them Paul Auster, who said that Roth was just plain wrong. On the website Big Think, Auster was recorded on video responding to Roth’s prediction about books. He states,

Philip has been talking like this for decades now and the fact is, he keeps writing books and people keep reading them. And… I disagree strenuously. Human beings need stories and we’re looking for them in all kinds of places, whether it’s television, whether it’s comic books or movies, radio plays, whatever form, people are hungry for stories. So much as I admire Philip Roth, I just think he’s wrong about this.

Although correct in observing that this is a common lament of Roth—he’s been making similar arguments for about twenty years—what seemed to be lost on Auster was Roth’s nuanced take on technology and its influence on the novel. It was not the death of narrative, as Auster seemed to suggest, but the competition between books and the visual forms of communication, along with reader devotion to the printed word, that concerned Roth.

Again, misunderstanding Roth—or perhaps understanding him all too well—generated even more publicity the next month when the Literary Review announced its 2009 nominees for that year’s Bad Sex Prize, an annual award created to “draw attention to the crude, tasteless, often perfunctory use of redundant passage of sexual description in the modern novel, and to discourage it” (Adams). The passage in question was from The Humbling when Simon Axler and his young bisexual lover, Pegeen Mike, pick up a woman at a local bar take out Pegeen’s green dildo, and then have the two women perform in front of Simon:

This was not soft porn. This was no longer two unclothed women caressing and kissing on a bed. There was something primitive about it now, this woman-on-woman violence, as though in the room filled with shadows, Pegeen were a magical composite of shaman, acrobat, and animal. It was as if she were wearing a mask on her genitals, a weird totem mask, that made her into what she was not and was not supposed to be. (114)

Jonathan Beckman at the Literary Review said of this passage not being soft porn. “Write a scene that repeated features a green dildo… unless you’re worried that it might be taken as such… [The] worry seems justified. But it’s the overcompensation that qualifies this passage for the award—the totems and shamanism are an attempt to convince us that Roth’s leering is actually given some vital anthropological insight” (qtd. in Flood, “Bad Sex Award”). Roth ultimately lost the Bad Sex prize to Jonathan Littell’s novel, The Kindly Ones, but that loss in and of itself generated a
renewed round of publicity for the then seventy-six-year-old author, who, forty years after the publication of Portnoy’s Complaint, apparently still possessed a “reputation as a crazed penis” (Roth, “Pictures” 132).

And charges of bad sex didn’t end there. The year 2010 opened with a piece by Katie Roiphe in The New York Times, decrying not the pornography of late Roth but the lack of good pornography. “The problem with the sex scenes in Philip Roth’s late work,” Roiphe decryes, “is not that they are pornographic, but that they fail as pornography. One feels that the author’s heart is not in it, that he is just going through the motions; one feels the impatient old master mapping out scenes (dildo, threesome), not writing them.” By way of illustration, Roiphe describes an acquaintance of hers, having just read a sex scene from The Humbling, literally throwing her copy into a trashcan on the subway platform “on the grounds that the scene was disgusting, dated, redundant.” Such comments helped to reignite a charge against Roth that was once all too common but had lately remained dormant: that the novelist was a misogynist, or at least failed to understand women.

And David Finkel, writing in the Huffington Post on Woody Allen’s latest film at the time, Whatever Works (2009), made the ever-popular comparison between Woody and Roth, highlighting the disturbing propensity that both artists have for significantly younger women. Comparing the Allen film to The Humbling, Finkel speculates on the curious coincidence between the two authors’ propensity for their older male protagonists getting involved with significantly younger women. He calls this “narrative thrust” a cliché—“What could be more commonplace than a pair of men individually obsessed with proving that male elders remain attractive to their female juniors?”—and then wonders “if Roth and Allen are collaborating on a project about older-men-younger-women double-dating.” While common sense may suggest that such assertions are unfounded, one might wonder what to make of the gossip surrounding Roth and Mia Farrow in the months following her breakup with Allen.

Yet, the rollercoaster of celebrity didn’t end with the beginning of the New Year. In April of 2010, Judith Thurman broke a story in The New Yorker of an Italian “counterfeit Roth,” something sounding straight from the pages of Operation Shylock. A couple of months earlier, the Italian newspaper Libero had run an interview with Philip Roth. In it, Roth supposedly told journalist Tommaso Debenedetti that President Obama was “a huge disappointment,” that he refused to fulfill his campaign promises, that he was ineffectual in the war on terror, and that the American President was doing nothing more than luxuriating in his newfound power. The problem with all of this, according to Thurman, is that the exchange was completely false. Debenedetti had completely made up the interview, Libero was duped into running the piece as authentic, and Roth—when asked about his supposed views—was dumbfounded. He even discovered that Debenedetti did something similar with popular genre novelist John Grisham. “You have to wonder what the guy was thinking,” Roth said, trying to make sense of all this. “The best explanation I can find is that this obscure freelancer had hit upon a way of selling articles by attributing anti-Obama sentiments to famous American writers. It was a good gimmick, and he probably had fun” (qtd. in Thurman). What better way to contribute to the ongoing avalanche of Roth-related celebrity: the revenge of Alvin Pepler and Moishe Pipik.

In 2011, Roth continued to add to his already impressive array of awards and accolades, some of which generated the kind of controversy and publicity that seems to bound the novelist. In March of that year he traveled to the White House to receive from President Obama the National Humanities Medal. (And, as far as anyone knows, there was no mention of his counterfeit comments attributed by Tommaso Debenedetti.) In February he appeared at an event at Manhattan’s Center for Fiction, where he was accompanied by Claudia Roth Pierpoint and Nathan Englander, and in May he was invited to a well-publicized engagement at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, where he read excerpts from Nemesis (2010). However, it was Roth’s biggest recognition of the year, the UK’s fourth annual International Man Booker Prize, that caused a significant amount of controversy. In May the Booker committee announced that its 2011 recipient would be Philip Roth. And although this revelation may not have come as a surprise to the literati—every year there are a variety of speculations on when Roth would be winning, not only the International Booker Prize but, perhaps more significantly, the Nobel Prize in Literature—what happened after the award announcement did generate amazement. Carmen Callil, founder of Virago Press and member of the Booker International Prize panel, quit her membership in protest of the panel’s choice. She dismissed Philip Roth saying, “I don’t rate him as a writer at all. I made it clear that I wouldn’t have put him on the longlist, so I was amazed when he stayed there. He was the only one I didn’t admire—all the others were fine.” Then, to add insult to injury, she went on to describe his writing: “He goes on and on and on about the same subject in almost every single book. It’s as though he’s sitting on your face and you can’t breathe” (Chilton). Callil’s comments, especially those about “sitting on your face,” created a firestorm in the online community and blogosphere, with a variety of major news sources as well as independent bloggers chime in on the controversy. Macy Halford blogged on The New Yorker’s website that “Face-sitting is as aggressive an image as I’ve ever heard used in dismissing a writer’s work,” and then she goes on to speculate on the possible prejudices harbored by Callil. Her Virago Press, a self-proclaimed feminist publisher, had published Claire Bloom’s Leaving a Doll’s House in 1996, and the press’ general philosophy may not be in accord with the creator of David Kepesh
and Mickey Sabbath. The Huffington Post even conducted a survey asking readers if Roth deserved the prize or if they would have quit the committee as Calil had (“Philip Roth Wins Man Booker Prize”).

This kind of inadvertent publicity may have been out of Roth’s hands, but it nonetheless thrust him back into the public spotlight. Indeed, it seems that social networking and the blogosphere have been the places where the novelist’s celebrity gets away from him. On 11 September 2011, the tenth anniversary of 9/11, the Angry Bear blog posted what appeared to be an article reprinted from the New York Times Book Review, a review of Roth’s so-called latest novel, Becoming Who We Are (complete with the specifics: Houghton Mifflin, 432 pages, $27). The article states that in this new novel, Roth is returning to the mode of alternate history, as he had in The Plot Against America. In it, the Bush Administration assists the Bin Laden family in fleeing out of the United States immediately after the attacks, becomes close to the Saudi leadership, declares war on Iraq, and touts Rudy Giuliani as America’s hero. The “alternate” part, this review notes, occurs with an uprising of Christian conservatives:

Perhaps saddest of all, Roth postulates an uprising of “Christian Conservatives” who vociferously and repeatedly applaud both the murder of hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians and wanton torture of prisoners—and who, in this novel, are largely credited with re-electing President Bush despite those revelations and an economic driven to stagnation by war—cheering the mere suggestion that an execution, even of someone who is clearly innocent, will occur. (Houghton)

The review goes on to pan the novel, calling it absurd and a “deranged flight of fancy.” The problem with the Angry Bear posting, of course, is that it was entirely fake—its own deranged flight of fancy. The author of the review admitted as much. Even more revealing, and more disturbing, is the speed at which other bloggers picked up on the false story. Business Insider, Milly US, and Equity Jungle all ran and/or hyperlinked the story. Furthermore, many readers responded to the Angry Bear blog posting, most not even questioning the reality of Roth’s “new book” and merely going with the flow. If, as Roth had once suggested, reality is outpacing our fiction, then the unedited and un-fact-checked “fiction” of the Internet may be a stumbling block to that assessment.

However, Becoming Who We Are was not the only “false” Roth book to surface in 2011. The year ended with a curious series of events that, while not generating the kind of media brouhaha surrounding Carmen Calil and the International Booker Prize, nonetheless caused puzzlement within the community of readers specifically interested in Roth’s fiction. In early December, major online booksellers such as Amazon.com, Barnes & Noble, and Powell’s, as well as smaller book-selling sites, all listed a brand-new book by Philip Roth. According to these booksellers, Notes for My Biographer was due to be released on 2 May 2012, and while there was little commentary on the book’s contents, the websites listed the page count (288 pages), the publisher (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt), and an ISBN. Several blogs posted this information—a new publication by Philip Roth is, for many, good news to circulate—this was then carried by other websites, posted on Facebook and Twitter, and generally spread throughout the Internet community. The problem with this social-network-generated publicity is that by the end of December, no such information was available on the major booksellers’ websites. Both Amazon.com and Barnes & Noble removed the book’s listing, and Powell’s followed suit in January 2012. It was as if the book had never existed. Such mistaken listings might be understandable with mom-and-pop booksellers and with bloggers quick to generate (unsubstantiated) news, but it was strange that major online booksellers would list a brand new text—complete with an ISBN and publication date, no less—if they had not received information directly from the publisher.

Research on this mystery produced no definitive answers. Both Barnes & Noble’s and Powell’s marketing departments claim that they had the original information, but then subsequent documentation necessitated that they remove the book from their online listings. And while Roth’s agent at the Wylie Agency refused to comment on the supposedly new book, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt claimed that Notes for My Biographer had never existed, and that it was never in the pipelines. To confound the matter, and perpetuate the mystery, even further, in January 2012 the University of Connecticut’s bookstore announced on its website an upcoming discussion by Ross Miller, professor emeritus of English at that university and formerly Roth’s official biographer. The website stated that on 26 January, Miller will “update us on the progress of [Roth’s official biography] to be published by Houghton Harcourt.” The web posting went on to say that “Roth’s next book is Notes for My Biographer, due this spring” (“Ross Miller”). Who better to substantiate the new book than Roth’s official biographer and the editor of Roth’s Library of America editions, Ross Miller, especially when the title of the supposedly book seems directly aimed at the biographer? However, Miller has provided no substantive information surrounding the reality of Notes for My Biographer. Indeed, such silence might help explain why, according to the publicity Department at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Ross is no longer writing the biography, and that such a book will not be published. The fact that the title of Roth’s allegedly new book concerns issues of biography, and that Miller is no longer working on the biography—not to mention the anxiety Zuckerman feels about E. L. Lonoff’s wannabe biographer, Robert Kliman, in Exit Ghost—all suggests that the novelist may have had problems with his
biographer, or even the very concept of capturing his entire life in print, and it provides further grit for the kind of gossip, whispers, innuendoes, and conjectures that have largely surrounded Roth’s status as a literary celebrity.

This was not the only recent effort of Roth attempting to control his own narratives, if, indeed, that is what was behind the puzzlement surrounding Notes for My Biographer. In March 2012, artist Bryan Zanisnik began a five-week engagement at the Abrons Arts Center, entitled Every Inch a Man. It was a site-specific performance and installation where, according to the press release, the artist read Philip Roth’s The Great American Novel within a life-size, specially-designed Plexiglas container, while fans blow old baseball cards and outdated currency into the air around him. However, in early April the online magazine Artnet reported that Roth and his lawyer had served Zanisnik, along with the Abrons Art Center, with a letter of cease and desist a mere thirty minutes after the show’s premier. According to the article, the gallery staff were shocked by Roth’s demand, although they went on to say that they were “not very concerned because we think the grounds of the cease and desist are erroneous. We’re not reading anything out loud or reproducing anything—there’s no chance here of copyright infringement” (“Philip Roth Tells Artist”). Zanisnik responded by photocopying the cease and desist letter and strewing the pages around his installation, where it became part of the debris, littering the stage with items from the center’s storage facilities and Zanisnik’s childhood. The underground arts website, AnimalNewYork, was one of several in the art community that pondered this legal move: “is this the new age of Thought Copyright Police or did the lawyers just make an oops? Why’s the Abrons Art Center sit down? Uh-oh.” (Galperina). By his own admission not even a big fan of Philip Roth, Zanisnik told Artnet that “It’s funny. The installation has nothing literally to do with Roth, but now it almost feels as if this absurdity is out of a Roth novel” (“Philip Roth Tells Artist”). Once again, in the media surrounding Philip Roth, fiction and reality—or the written and unwritten worlds—collide in unpredictable and unlikely ways.

It would be wonderful if one could speculate with any kind of certainty on the potential links between these popular culture phenomena and machinations of the author. With incidences such as those surrounding Notes for My Biographer, one might imagine that Roth has had some hand in the events, but in others, such as the Carmen Callil uproar or the “Jewish Shout Mix 3,” the publicity remained outside of, and outpacing, his grasp. Much like in the Wizard of Oz, it would be useful to be able to pull back the screen surrounding these dramas and reveal the man behind the curtain, Roth himself, pulling the strings and levers of these performances. This would make sense, given the fact that we’re discussing a novelist who has made a reputation of speaking out of both sides of his mouth, telling us his “true” intentions while at the same time performing the opposite in his fiction. He has done it before in literary publicity surrounding The Ghost Writer, The Counterlife, The Facts, Operation Shylock, and The Plot Against America. But alas, we can only fantasize about these plots, these engagements in the kind of mischievousness that Roth appears to hold so dear. What this brief media cultural survey demonstrates, however, is an uncanny coincidence between the self-reflective narrative play of the novelist and the unpredictably unstable realities of the culture that surround him. Maybe Roth was right in 1960 after all about the potential for actuality—continually—to outdo the strength of our imaginations.

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Philip Roth and the Dynamics of Written and Unwritten Celebrity

NOTES

1. I refer, here, to writers whose work falls under that ill-defined and problematic definition of “literary fiction,” not to those whose writings are subsumed underneath that equally ill-defined and problematic descriptive umbrella of “genre fiction.” Given the subject matter and the audience of their works, such writers as Stephen King and J. K. Rowling become almost de facto celebrities.


3. Indeed, much like his Zuckerman books, The Breast was largely a response to the celebrity he received after the publication of Portnoy’s Complaint. As Roth told Sara Davidson in a 1977 interview, “The Breast wasn’t just about entrapment in the flesh and the horrors of desire, it was also inspired by some thinking I had to do about fame, notoriety and scandal. When the idea for the book first came to me, I had myself only recently become an object of curiosity, believed to be somewhat in very much the sexual freak and grotesque” (101:102).

4. For a fuller treatment of the thematic role of celebrity in Roth’s fiction, especially as it surrounds the figure of Nathan Zuckerman, see Joe Moran.

5. The frequency of Roth’s interviews has increased significantly over the past several years. Since the publication of The Plot Against America in 2004, the novelist has taken part in well over fifty interviews and profiles.

6. Marcus never did complete the fifteen-minute dance mix, but he did create a nine-and-a-half minute version, which he called “Jewish Shouting Cantina Club Mix.” In an email exchange with me, Marcus shared the impact of his dance mixes:

I did in fact create a longer, more elaborate mix after all the fuss. But the attention span for a viral phenomenon is very short, microscopic, in fact. The first, tiny mix made headlines all over the world, and was downloaded more than ten thousand times (which means that many more people probably listened to it without downloading). The second one created scarcely a ripple. I’m sure there’s a lesson here.

7. Tina Brown’s interview with Roth was originally in video format. To view the various video segments, go to www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2009/10/21/philip-roth-unbound.html.

8. This was certainly not the first time that Roth had lamented the dwindling significance of the novel. In 1993, for example, he discussed in an interview what he called the “gulag archipelago of readers,” stating:

There’s been a drastic decline, even a disappearance, of a serious readership. That’s inexusable. We can’t fail to see it. It’s also inexusable, given the pressures in the society. That’s a tragedy by readers, I don’t mean people who pick up a book, once in a while. By readers, I mean people who when they are at work during the day think that after dinner tonight and after the kids are in bed, I’m going to read for two hours. (“Believe Me” B2)

The fact that several journalists did not contextualize Roth’s comments to Brown, that they did not see them within a longer history of dire predictions for the act of reading (as opposed to forecasts on the state of the novel), only perpetuated a misunderstanding of the novelist’s broader comments.

9. Among others, Barbara Lippert comments on the relationship between Roth and Farrow and calls it “one of the more startling moves in the romance ecosystem.” Jeet Heer mentions this gossip—how Farrow “briefly ended up in the arms of Philip Roth”—in his review of The
Human Stain. Dan Callahan in *Slant Magazine* suggested the same. Marion Meade, in her tabloid-inspired biography of Woody Allen, asserts that Farrow began dating Roth in 1995 (306).

10. These comments come from a Google translation of De Benedetti’s original interview on the Libero’s website accessed in early 2010. The interview has since been removed from the site.

11. Video of the Center for Fiction event can be found at their website, http://centerforfiction.org/calendar/philip-roth.

12. Roth released a short video, where he thanks the International Booker committee for the award, albeit in a dry, unemotional, and somewhat detached manner. This video is available on YouTube at www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=B6uL8SUYqeY.

13. In a personal email to the author, Ken Houghton, the author of the faux review, expressed his reasoning behind the stunt, stating that the last ten years have seemed to be more like something out of fiction than reality, so he thought he’d treat the ten-year anniversary of 9/11 in a similar manner, and who better to reference than Philip Roth. As Houghton disclosed, “Sadly, the review is purely whimsical, not even docudrama. Speaking strictly for me, I wish the past ten years had been a Roth novel; they would make more sense and have been more interesting. I rather hope he does fictionalize the past ten years, but I suspect *Exit Ghost* and *The Plot Against America* are as close as we are going to get.”

14. As of April 2012, *Notes for My Biographer* is still listed on Amazon.com’s sites in the UK, Canada, France, and Germany, and all with the same ISBN and 2 May 2012 publication date, and all apparently available for pre-ordering.

15. To find out more about *Notes for My Biographer*, I attempted to contact marketing or publicity departments at Amazon.com, Barnes & Noble, and Powell’s via email, as well as Roth’s agent and his publisher. Neither Amazon nor Roth’s agent at the Wylie Agency responded to my inquiries. However, both Barnes & Noble and Powell’s did follow up to my emails. Powell’s marketing department wrote, “We receive the information in a data feed from our distributor Ingram in advance of placing an order. In checking Ingram’s records, I see a note that says Not Available so I guess only HMH has the answer.” Barnes & Noble stated, “The pub date has changed,” that “Mr. Roth has control of the project and is continuing to work on it,” and that all further inquiries should be directed at the publisher. Curiously enough, the publisher disputes the booksellers’ claims. Lori Glazer, vice president and director of publicity at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, said bluntly in her email that “[t]here is no book by Philip Roth in the pipeline.” When asked in a follow-up email why online booksellers had listed *Notes for My Biographer* back in December—and why many still list the book as available for pre-order—Glazer responded with the terse note, “Sorry, don’t know. There is no book.”

16. Ross Miller has never responded to my inquiries on his biography, his 26 January talk at the University of Connecticut’s bookstore, or *Notes for My Biographer*. Lori Glazer, however, has informed me in an email that “[t]he Ross Miller biography did not work out and will not be published.”

17. This was certainly not the first time that Roth’s narratives have been adapted, however loosely, for the stage. In 1971, the Plymouth Theatre in New York showcased *Unlikely Heroes*, three short performance pieces based on “Defender of the Faith,” “Elie, the Fanatic,” and “Epstein.” And more recently, in 2007 at Zankel Hall (a venue at Carnegie Hall), Philip Seymour Hoffman read from *Everyman*, where his passages were interspersed with short works for a string quartet by composers Arvo Part and Philip Glass.