Texts, Lives, and Bellybuttons: Philip Roth’s *Operation Shylock* and the Renegotiation of Subjectivity

Derek Parker Royal

It is not an exaggeration to state that Philip Roth is obsessed with the play between the world that is inscribed on the page and the world that is not. Ever since *My Life as a Man* (1974) he has engaged in a relentless negotiation between life and art, a metafictional realm of instability where narrative is an uncertain combination of creator and creation. Critics have accused him of filling his fictional worlds with nothing more than a thinly veiled chronicle of his own life and the real lives around him. Indeed, his Zuckerman novels and the “autobiographical” works that followed have been dismissed as mere personal—and, some would argue, narcissistic—disclosures. But Roth is engaged in a more philosophical investigation, an exploration that highlights interrelationship between autobiography and fiction. He calls this textual preoccupation, in one of his earlier essays, “the relationship between the written and the unwritten world”:

the worlds that I feel myself shuttling between every day couldn’t be more succinctly described. Back and forth, back and forth, bearing fresh information, detailed instructions, garbled messages, desperate inquires, naive expectations, baffling challenges . . . in all, cast somewhat in the role of the courier Barnabas, whom the Land Surveyor K. enlists to traverse the steep winding road between the village and the castle in Kafka’s novel about the difficulties of getting through.

Roth has spent the better part of his career traveling between these two worlds, so many times in fact that one would be hard pressed to tell which is the village and which is the castle. Is the castle a metaphor for the written world, the modernist high ground of art, as the young Nathan Zuckerman would believe; or is it instead the domain of “the facts,” the lived world from which art ultimately emanates and takes its sustenance? For literary critics, of course, this distinction is moot. The “garbled messages” and “baffling challenges” themselves are the points of departure, arrival, and the message, all rolled into one.

This relationship between the written and the unwritten worlds has gained attention in recent years, at least within Roth studies, especially when viewed in light of how autobiographies are constructed. The publication of an autobiography, especially one from the bright spotlights of the entertainment industry (and, given both the “scandal” of *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969) and his more recent breakup with actress Claire Bloom, Roth has found himself a reluctant celebrity), always brings with it both a sense of titillating expectation and high risk. Will the book be nothing more than an exaggerated kiss-and-tell-all, leaving a trail of publicity-damaged figures in its wake; or will it be an earnest attempt at recreating a life that reveals just as much about the act of writing autobiography as it does of its subject matter? When Roth published *The Facts: A Novelist’s Autobiography* in 1988, he was doing outright what many had already accused him of doing most of his career: writing about himself. In the highly revealing last section of *The Facts*, where Nathan Zuckerman questions his creator’s autobiographical intentions, Zuckerman tells him “you’ve written metamorphoses of yourself so many times, you no longer have any idea what you are or ever were. By now what you are is a walking text . . . With autobiography, there’s always another text, a countertext, if you will, to the one presented. It’s probably the most manipulative of all literary forms.” What is more, Claire Bloom’s 1996 memoir, *Leaving A Doll’s House: A Memoir*, underscores the project of Roth’s more recent fiction. Not only is it a countertext to Roth’s own—much as Maria provides to Zuckerman’s in *The Counterlife* (1986)—but it is also a demonstration by example of the “walking text” that is Philip Roth.

One of the recurring themes in Bloom’s memoir, especially in the last chapters, is her inability to read Roth. “Which was the real Philip Roth?” she asks at one point, echoing the question Roth himself asks in *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (1993). And readers (of both Bloom’s book and Roth’s novels) are encouraged to speculate on the same: are we to take Roth’s autobiographical writings as autobiography? But instead of playing the celebrity game and reading Bloom’s memoir as a fair or unfair portrait of Roth, perhaps it would
be more fruitful to approach her text as one of the latest contributions to the "walking text." It is necessary to keep in mind that the persona of Roth is far from being the sole product of the author himself. From the very beginning of his career he has been the subject of multiple countertexts, both popular and critical: the self-effacing few, the scandalous cultural phenomenon behind *Portnoy's Complaint*, the stand-up comedian (as opposed to the "serious" novelist), the narcissistic author, the pornographer, the good and dutiful son, and the misogynist. These representations of Roth, regardless of their validity, have gone on to further inspire Roth and fuel his fiction. Without the fame of and reaction to *Portnoy's Complaint*, there may never have been a Zuckerman nor a literary character named "Philip Roth" obsessed with the production of the self. These texts and countertexts live in a symbiotic manner, and it is in this complementary relationship that the subject of fiction and autobiography comes into play. What Roth's works (especially the more recent "autobiographical" pieces) directly address, and what Bloom's memoir indirectly asks us to consider, is the construction of autobiography and its resemblance in many ways to the craft underlying fiction. Roth's post-Zuckerman books and Bloom's memoir reveal how both authors create a text of the self and a countercontext of the other (and in the former's case, countercontexts to the text of the self). While Roth's postmodern awareness of the self is both honest and potentially liberating, there is nonetheless a danger in the realization that identity may be nothing more than a construction. An unanchored self, inscribed to obsessive lengths, can lead to what the character of Roth experienced in *Operation Shylock*: "Me-itis" or "drowning in the tiny tub of yourself." The publication of Bloom's autobiography, and of Roth's works themselves, asks us to consider this relationship between fiction and autobiography, the dynamics involved, and the implications of this mixture. Put another way, it raises questions of the authenticity of autobiographical writing and of the self. If Bloom's *Leaving a Doll's House* provides us with the opportunity to raise these issues, it is Roth's most ambitious work to date, *Operation Shylock*, to which we can turn for a sustained analysis.

While most critics—scholarly and otherwise—have wisely abandoned their search for the actual man behind Zuckerman, Peter Lurie, Alexander Portnoy, David Kepesh, and even "Roth," there is nonetheless a persistent confusion over the forms through which Philip Roth the author chooses to reveal himself (or his selves). A relatively recent manifestation of this phenomenon occurred with the publication of *Operation Shylock*. Whatever its shortcomings, reviewers welcomed Roth's latest text as a return to his strong "novelistic" abilities. Michiko Kakutani, one of the first to review the book, stated that "the reader is encouraged to read this novel as a kind of autobiographical confession" (emphasis added). John Updike called "this novel, which purports to be a confession," an international, medical, and psychological thriller in the vein of Dostoyevsky and Mann. D. M. Thomas read "Philip Roth's new novel!" as a work in the literary tradition of creative doubles. Robert Alter, likewise seeing in *Operation Shylock* the well-worn theme of the dopplegänger, found "a fictional character named Philip Roth, who shares with the author of this novel a biography...a wife and a list of publications from *Goodbye, Columbus* to *Patrimony*." However, Alter continued, if reading the book as a novel proved problematic, one could better read it as "a looser and less realistic fiction of the sort that Gide had in mind when he designated several of his longer narratives as *soliés*—roughly, farces." Harold Bloom, perhaps one of the book's more perceptive early critics, not only noticed the double play at work, but also identified the fictive game in which Roth was engaging. Alan Cooper, writing a few years after the novel’s publication, similarly noted the book’s labyrinthine exploration into identity by referring to the hero of his post-Zuckerman works as "Zuckerroth." For his part Roth himself said that his book should be read as neither novel nor farce, but should instead be taken as he subtitled it. "The book is true," he states during one interview, "I'm not trying to confuse you...This happened. I stepped into a strange hole, which I don't understand to this day...I tell [the critics], 'Well, how can I make it up since you've always said I am incapable of making anything up? I can't win!'" He claimed that in 1988 he actually confronted an exact double who called himself "Philip Roth" and who appropriated his own reputation for purposes that were as fantastic as they were ridiculous. "Inasmuch as his imposturing constituted a crisis I was living rather than writing, it embodied a form of self-denunciation that I could not sanction, a satirizing of me so bizarre and unrealistic as to exceed by far the boundaries of amusing mischief I may myself have playfully perpetrated on my own existence in fiction." Significantly, one year later he would make a claim that curiously resembles the unlikely assertion he made with *Operation Shylock*. Roth held that the first sentence from each of his nineteen works of fiction, beginning with *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959) and ending with *Operation Shylock*'s opening ("For
only those who are not familiar with Roth’s many fictions would imagine taking him at his word, and even then those reading Operation Shylock would be hard pressed to find any verisimilitude in the text. In fact, given his past frustrations over critics trying to discover “Philip Roth” within one of his characters, one would expect that a representational reading would be the last thing he would want his readers to bring to his latest book.15 Updike’s, Alter’s, and Thomas’s “novelistic” readings do allow for a fictional or constructed approach to the text, but they nonetheless fail to consider (especially in light of his earlier works) the larger issues in which Roth is engaged. It is obvious that Roth’s own disclosures are as duplicitous as they are revealing. They, along with the actual text of Operation Shylock, are a significant commentary on his ongoing fascination with the relationship between author and subject as well as the playful, yet highly revealing, nature of fiction. As with the Zuckerman works, Operation Shylock (as well as the three texts that preceded it) is a variation on the theme of constructed identities, but this time he explores more fully that paradoxically revealing Yiddish proverb, “Truth is the safest lie.” Or, put another way, Roth engages in a literary act similar to the unlikely encounters his cousin Apter creates, “fiction that, like so much of fiction, provides the storyteller with the lie through which to expose his unspeakable truth.”16 This notion, in many ways, is similar in kind to that found in Emily Dickinson’s “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—.” As the poem suggests, direct truth is so powerful that it is capable of overwhelming the one who pursues it and, as a result, the best way to encounter it is askance. What is more, as a philosophy of narrative, this approach allows the author latitude, so that she or he may engage in fictive exercises of ambivalence, thereby challenging the reader and encourage-

aging an active participation in the reading process. In Operation Shylock Roth confronts his subject matter in much the same manner. His “unspeakable truth”—whether it be 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, the mischievous text Roth would probably admit, of Operation Shylock. The late twentieth-century Jewish American novelist would most wholeheartedly concur with the nineteenth-century Dickinson when she asserts, “Success in Circuit lies.” Many Roth critics have approached his texts almost solely in terms of his ethnicity and his (early) Jamesian realism. For critics who privilege a more poststructuralist approach to texts and desire an alternative to the literature of exhaustion, this relegated him to a category of historically fixed and (for many) antiquated styles. However, since the 1980s there has nevertheless been a growing number of readings concerning the postmodern assumptions and structures underlying Roth’s works, assumptions that include such issues as the centered subject, the emphasis on metafiction, and the breakdown of traditional narrative. For instance, My Life as a Man explores the (male) self as a socially constructed subject. Peter Tarnopol’s story is not about how he determines himself, but how others determine him. The Ghost Writer (1979) can be read as a deconstructive exercise in textual authority and responsibility, where the author underscores the constructed nature of text as well as of self so as to recreate freely an alternative narrative. For instance, Zuckerman, the “author” of the living Anne Frank, uses his creation to serve as a countertext to the stifling rhetoric of Judge Wapner’s. The Counterlife challenges us to transcend the anxiety of the interpretive act, to embrace and be liberated by the duplicity of reality itself (i.e., the variety of subjective perceptions to phenomena) and not merely the duplicity of language. And the more recent autobiographical works establish a context for the psychological writer self.17 Such postmodern readings of Roth’s fiction serve as a cogent response to the anxieties underlying some contemporary theories of autobiography (pertinent theories in the case of Roth, who questions the assumptions of autobiography within his fiction). Scholars who see in autobiographical fiction—of Roth, Nabokov, Barth, and others—a privileging of textual representations of the subject worry that the authors are evading the responsibilities of history, or in other words,
are not being true to the events of the unwritten world. Working with *My Life as a Man*, Philip Dodd concludes that “my charge against autobiography-as-fiction, whether practiced by writers or celebrated by critics, is that autobiography becomes a safe and reserved space in which the harried self is released from the demands of history to become the product either of art (conservative version) or textuality (radical version).” What Dodd apparently does not see in Roth’s novels is the desire to articulate the historical context surrounding a specific subject position, one grounded in the unwritten world and more pertinent than any preoccupation with the self: “my life as a Jewish man.” Throughout most of his fiction, Roth has explored issues of Jewish ethnicity within various postmodern assumptions. His protagonists have always been constructed (and reconstructed) within the context of competing ethnic, social, economic, and gender-based historical forces. Roth has never been one to withdraw into a Barthesian world of intertextual play without first packing with him the sights, smells, and sounds of Newark and Jerusalem. He is not merely interested in the intertextual interplay among author, text, and interpretation (in many ways a solipsistic and exhausted exercise in itself). Reading him purely as an intricately self-conscious writer would be as limiting and unjust as reading him purely in terms of his ethnicity. The path between his written and unwritten worlds is a two-way street where neither “reality” nor “fiction” collides and subordinates the other. What is more, both of these realms interact in a complementary manner, creating a narrative space that allows Roth to explore Jewish American identity on his own terms. As Mark Shechner so clearly puts it, “the writer may play fast and loose with the I, doing anything with Zuckerman that suits his fancy or his vision of life, but he dare not tamper with the we. Jewish history is not something to be arbitrarily reinvented.”

Roth, in other words, is a writer most genuinely concerned with both his history and his aesthetics. He brings the postmodern “play” of textual creation into the realm of the Jewish experience and in doing so explores the ways in which Jews in general, and Jewish Americans in particular, have “created” or defined themselves against the backdrops of both their ethnic heritage and the non-Jewish culture at large.

Since *The Counterlife*, Roth has further explored the fictionalized boundaries between the written and the unwritten worlds. Yet whereas his previous novels focus by and large on the interplay among characters that resemble their creator (e.g., Jewish American writers and/or professors), the immediate post-Zuckerman works concern the author himself. In *The Facts, Deception* (1990), *Patrimony* (1991), and *Operation Shylock* the subject under consideration is no longer Zuckerman or Tarnopol, but “Philip Roth.” Just as in Roth’s life, Philip’s is populated by a father named Herman, a wife (or lover) named Claire, and a brother named Sandy who all live in and travel between Newark, New York, Connecticut, Chicago, London, and Jerusalem. If Nathan’s words to Henry—“We are all each other’s authors”—epitomize Roth’s Zuckerman fiction, then Philip’s tirade in *Deception* stands as the representative passage of his “autobiographical” project: “I write fiction and I am told it’s autobiography, I write autobiography and I am told it’s fiction, so since I’m so dim and they’re so smart, let them decide what it is or it isn’t.”

Roth has been well acquainted with this guessing game of autobiographical presence almost from the very beginning of his career, and most certainly since the publication of *Portnoy’s Complaint*. But as the above words of Philip demonstrate, Roth, in no uncertain terms, is here throwing down the gauntlet to his readers and critics, challenging them to distinguish between the author and the artifice, to discover within the twists and turns of his narratives a figure that is Philip Roth the writer.

The determination between fact and fiction, however, is consequential, and Roth of course is aware of this. In contrast to all of his previous novels, and to his most recent works, each text within the “autobiographical” tetralogy possesses a subtitle that on the surface serves as a directive for interpretation: *The Facts* should be read as “A Novelist’s Autobiography,” *Deception* is presented as “A Novel,” *Patrimony* is “A True Story,” and *Operation Shylock* professes to being “A Confession.” Taken at face value, only one of texts should be read as fiction while the others stand out as bare-bones autobiography. However, this distinction between the purely fictional and the purely autobiographical is undermined from the outset, in the very book where Roth is supposed to shed his masks. *The Facts* is framed by two letters, one from Philip to Zuckerman and the other from Zuckerman to Philip, and together these “fictions” make up a quarter of the “facts.” The ideas of autobiography and the coherent self are deconstructed from the very first page. In his letter, Philip confides to Zuckerman that he has suffered a Halicron-induced depression and felt himself “coming undone.” To put himself back together, he “had to go back to the moment of origin,” the facts prior to fiction, despite the naivete of such a movement. But Roth
is not convinced, and in perhaps the book’s most moving chapter, “Girl of My Dreams,” the author indirectly reveals his suspicions of representing reality as it is truly lived. In what is supposed to be the “factual” part of the book, the author gives an account of his painful experience with his first wife Josie (whose fictional embodiment is Maureen in My Life As a Man), and laments the fact that he had ever fallen for her deceptive acts, behavior which he describes in artistic and novelistic terms. He calls her “the greatest creative-writing teacher of them all,” and then admits that he is at a loss to determine which of her stories are lies and which are true: “who can distinguish what is so from what isn’t so when confronted with a master of fabrication?” Even if the reader neglects to notice the ample associations between Josie’s creative duplicity and Roth’s artistic flair, these very words ought to reverberate as the height of irony. One can easily imagine Roth mischievously reveling in these narrative bouts with his marital nemesis.

As does Roth, Zuckerman easily sees through Philip’s textual facade and the futility of trying to recover any factual origins for the purposes of understanding himself (or at least in helping his readership understand him). What Philip (Roth) has been engaged in all along, from the creation of Neil Klugman to that of Nathan himself, is the re-invention of the self: “you’ve written metamorphoses of yourself so many times, you no longer have any idea what you are or ever were. By now what you are is a walking text.” Besides, Maria Zuckerman reminds him, by sticking to the facts, Philip is engaging in *oculatio*, a Latin rhetorical strategy whereby one broaches something by saying that he is not going to mention it. This act is as deceptive, as “fictional,” as fiction. Even Zuckerman, the supposedly fictional embodiment of his creator, believes that autobiography is highly manipulative and is at a loss to determine what self in *The Facts* is being countered. As he tells Maria, “having this letter at the end is a self-defensive trick to have it both ways. I’m not even sure any longer which of us he’s set up as the straw man. I thought first it was him in his letter to me—now it feels like me in my letter to him.” For his part, even Philip acknowledges the labyrinth he has entered—*Begging the Question*, he says, may have been a better title than *The Facts*—but he nonetheless needs to undergo this autobiographical exercise in order “to transform myself into myself.”

This is exactly what Philip Roth has done: transform Roth into Philip. After deconstructing the binary of fiction-autobiography and ushering Zuckerman out of his texts, Roth turns solely to his counterself. This transformation is certainly apparent in *The Facts, Deception*, and *Patrimony*, but only in *Operation Shylock: A Confession* does it reach its fullest expression. As with the two books before it, this “confession” takes as its protagonist the counterself Philip, and like *The Facts*, it defiantly challenges the reader to differentiate between “reality” and “fiction.” But what distinguishes *Operation Shylock* from the previous books, and what makes it such a distinctively experimental work, is not only its ambitious scope, but also how it reveals the symbiotic relationship between the written and unwritten worlds. Roth structures the text so that author and subject become indistinguishable, and it appears that the subject writes the author as much as the author writes the subject.

The plot of this “true” story is as fantastical as many in Roth’s novels, filled with ongoing crises and unexpected turns, and because it can get twisted at times it may help to recount it here in brief. Everything begins around the time of the John Demjanjuk trials, when Philip receives a call from his cousin in Israel telling him that there is a man attending the trials who not only looks like him, but calls himself Philip Roth. Looking into the matter, he discovers that there is actually an impostor in Jerusalem using his name and publicly advocating Diasporism as the only solution to the “Jewish Problems” in the Middle East. After flying to Jerusalem, against the wishes of Claire Bloom, Philip encounters the double, a fanatical admirer of his novels and whose appearance he finds frighteningly similar to his own—facial features, clothes, and all. The other Philip and his girlfriend are working to convince Israelis that if European Jews aren’t soon relocated back into Europe, 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. Against his better judgment Philip gets involved in the plot, along the way encountering suspicious characters whose relations to the PLO, the Mossad, or to the other Philip are suggested but never fully disclosed. The storyline ends with an agent asking the real Philip (who is by this time extremely paranoid) to undertake intelligence operations for the Mossad.

As in many of Roth’s novels, *Operation Shylock* is filled with texts that attempt to transcribe a life, or as Nathan Zuckerman once put it, “the kind of stories people turn life into, the kind of lives that people turn stories into.” There are the oral texts of Aharon Appelfeld, interviewed by Philip for the *New York Times* (the transcripts of which actu-
ally did appear in the book review section and were later reprinted in Appelfeld’s Beyond Despair; the “fictional” stories of Philip’s cousin Apter; the recording of the spurious Anti-Semitic Anonymous workout tape from Pipik,32 Philip’s double; and the dialog taken from the minutes of the John Demjanjuk trial. More significant, especially when viewed in light of Roth’s own position as a writer, are the many written texts that suffice book. Among these are the travel diaries of Leon Klinghoffer, the Jew who was killed by the PLO during the Achilles Lauro hijacking. Philip comes to the diaries through David Supposnik, a Mossad agent posing as a rare book dealer, and is asked by him to write an introduction for their publication so that they may reach a wide audience. What Eleanor Roosevelt did for The Diary of Anne Frank, Supposnik urges, Philip Roth can do for The Travel Diaries of Leon Klinghoffer. The problem, as Philip later discovers, is not only that Supposnik is an agent, but that the diaries are fabricated created to lure him into espionage. There is also the Treblinka memoir of Eliahu Rosenberg, a Jewish “death commando” whose job it was to empty and clean the gas chambers that he claimed Demjanjuk operated. His memoir, written in 1945 and describing the “death” of Ivan the Terrible at the hands of his captors, contradicts the positive identity he made of Demjanjuk in earlier testimony. When the defense establishes that he had escaped Treblinka before the revolt, Rosenberg argues that the memoir was nonetheless a collective one, based on hearsay from supposed eyewitnesses. In addition to these texts, there are the Hebrew sentence on Smilesburger’s blackboard that Philip cannot read and two pieces of writing that Philip “imagines” into his tale: a letter from Philip to Pipik’s girlfriend, Wanda Jane “Jinx” Possesski;33 and His Way, the secret exposé of Philip that Pipik writes, and whose content, significantly enough, turns out to be nothing but blank pages. In each case, the authors generate a text whose authenticity is either refuted or placed in doubt. As in The Ghost Writer, Roth here is questioning the notions of originality, the possibility of representation, and the overall authority of the text.

Roth’s most extensive critique of textual reliability is the book itself, just as with all the other “texts” that Philip encounters, the one he actually creates, Operation Shylock, is filled with gaps and inconsistencies. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the book’s structure, beginning with its narrative frames. Bracketing the story proper are two narrative qualifiers, each of which stands in stark contrast to the other. In the preface, Roth outlines the true life conditions under which the book was written: “I’ve drawn Operation Shylock from notebook journals. The book is as accurate an account as I am able to give of actual occurrences that I lived through during my middle fifties and that culminated, early in 1988, in my agreeing to undertake an intelligence-gathering operation for Israel’s foreign intelligence service, the Mossad.”34

Like The Facts before it, Roth professes to be taking his story straight from his notebooks (he’s an avid note taker) and without the vernish of fiction. The only “facts” altered are for legal reasons, and “these are minor changes that mainly involve details of identification and locale and are of little significance to the overall story and its verisimilitude.”35 His “Note to the Reader” at the end of the book, on the other hand, is something else entirely. In addition to the standard Simon and Schuster disclaimer—“This book is a work of fiction. Otherwise, the names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental”—the Note mentions the two nonfiction exceptions: the interview with Appelfeld and the minutes from the Demjanjuk trial. The Note then ends with the words, “This confession is false.”36 Outside of the obvious discrepancy, these two qualifications reveal several suspect traces that are difficult to ignore. First, the wording in the above quoted section of the Preface should raise suspicion in the astute reader. “The book is as accurate an account as I am able to give of actual occurrences . . .” (emphasis added). Coming from a writer with a history of creating fictive labyrinths, these words would seem to suggest more of a narrative temperament or predispension than a limitation or inability of style. Between the lines, they read as a backhanded acknowledgment of his addiction to fictional “mischief,” and coupled with the “minor changes” that are of “little significance,” they leave the reader on his guard.

Furthermore, there is the ambiguous meaning behind the final admission, “This confession is false.” Is it the “confession” of fiction uttered in the Note that is false, or is the entire text itself, that professes verisimilitude and whose subtitle bears the word “confession,” that is false? Roth gives the reader no indication of and is noticeably—in mischief?—absent concerning any textual clues. The positioning of the Note raises similar questions. For Simon and Schuster and its imprints, it is standard practice in every work of fiction to insert the disclaimer in small type on the copyright page immediately underneath the publisher’s address. There is no such
disclaimer on the copyright page of *Operation Shylock*, perhaps because the legal department thought that the subtitle “A Confession” was sufficient. Yet Roth nonetheless places his amended version of the disclaimer at the very end of the book, a space normally reserved for notes on the author or type. His “Note to the Reader” not only appears in exactly the same type as the rest of the book (suggesting continuity of the text), but, more significantly, is also listed prominently in the table of contents. It works more as a narrative slap in the face than as an unobtrusive legal formality.

Even more suspect is the “missing” chapter 11 at the end of the book. In chapter 10 Philip discovers that Smilesburger, an elderly agent of the Mossad posing as a retired jeweler, wants him to do some intelligence gathering for the agency in Athens. It’s never explicitly revealed what he is to do in Athens, but there is a hint that it may involve PLO leader Yasir Arafat. Yet when the reader finishes that chapter and turns to the next, he finds no climactic to the story that has been building all along, but instead an epilogue entitled “Words Generally Only Spoil Things.” Philip says that he chose to delete the last twelve thousand words to his book because “the contents of chapter 11, ‘Operation Shylock,’ were deemed by [Smilesburger] to contain information too seriously detrimental to his agency’s interests and to the Israeli government.” For his part, Smilesburger suggests that Philip perform that “sacrosanct prank of artistic transubstantiation,” and turn the confession into fiction.

“If I were to do as you ask,” Philip replies, “the whole book would be spurious. Calling fiction fact would undermine everything,” and given Roth’s privileging of the former, would be a highly suspect posture. These last lines resonate with a narrative impishness so common in much of Roth’s writings. In actuality, the prank of transubstantiation—a mischievous word choice on Roth’s part—has already taken place. By substituting an epilogue for the story’s conclusion, Roth conflates our notions of “fact” and “fiction” and places the product of textual duplicity directly into the hands of the reader. The text that the reader literally holds, *Operation Shylock*, is every bit as unreliable as Rosenberg’s memoir, Klinghoffer’s diaries, and Pipik’s workout tape. It is no small fact that the title of the book is the same as the title of the deleted chapter (as well as the code name of the intelligence operation). “Operation Shylock” both is and isn’t there. In a deconstructive act of erasure, Roth has undermined the course of his entire creation, problematizing its origin as well as its teleology. With its narrative frames and missing chapter, the text begins in question and ends in fragmentation.

Along with the unreliable texts, the book is populated with fragmented subjects who attempt to (re)create themselves. Most of the characters in the story are either artists, such as Apter and Appelfeld, or artist-like figures who are in the process of “authoring” their lives. Standing behind the entire plot almost as a specter is John Demjanjuk, the historical figure who found himself at the center of controversy in being mistaken for “Ivan the Terrible” of Treblinka (in August 1993, approximately four months after the publication of *Operation Shylock*, the Supreme Court of Israel later unanimously acquitted him of any crimes). For Philip, he is in many ways the most riveting part of the story. He goes to the trial as soon as he arrives in Jerusalem, before investigating Pipik, and once he sees the accused on the stand, “not only did my double cease to exist, but, for the time being, so did I.” And so does the accused, for when Philip muses on Demjanjuk or “reimagines” his life as Ivan, all he can repeat to himself is “So there he was. Or wasn’t.” The identity of Demjanjuk is at this point uncertain and constantly called into question. The cohesion of Philip is also problematic. Just as in *The Facts*, Philip alerts the reader to his condition in 1987 due to “Halcion madness”:

> My mind began to disintegrate. The word DISINTEGRATION seemed itself to be the matter out of which my brain was constituted, and it began spontaneously coming apart. The fourteen letters, big, chunky, irregularly sized components of my brain, elaborately intertwined, tore jaggedly loose from one another, sometimes a fragment of a letter at a time, but usually in painfully unpronounceable nonsyllabic segments of two or three, their edges roughly serrated. This mental coming apart was as distinctly physical a reality as a tooth being pulled, and the agony of it was excruciating.

Philip calls this condition “Me-itis. Microcosmosis. Drowning in the tiny tub of yourself.” As he suggests, there is a symbiotic relationship between mental existence and physical reality, and the agent that binds the two together is the word, the text where Roth has placed so much of his artistic investment. (This “confessional” account of Philip’s breakdown, along with the author’s mischievous play with reality and fiction, is given an added twist when read in light of Claire Bloom’s *Leaving a Doll’s House*. She states in her mem-
oir that the account of her husband's mental disintegration in *Operation Shylock* was "neither inaccurate nor overblown." If Bloom is correct, then this accurate confession, placed within the context of unlikely and spurious accounts, further complicates the autobiographical premise of the book. Furthermore, when Philip first talks to Pipik over the telephone, he uses a disguise the name of Pierre Roget, author of the famous thesaurus (and whose initials are the same as his). As is suggested by his choice of masks, Philip finds himself trapped in a game of synonymous intrigue where one identity, much like the words in a thesaurus, is substituted for another. In yet another act of "artistic transubstantiation," Roth takes the figure of Philip and turns him into a text—or looked at another way, takes the "text" of his own identity and deconstructs it into "unpronounceable nonsyllabic segments."

While Philip's sense of self is breaking down, Pipik is in the process of constructing his, and the one he constructs is Philip's. He is the writer's true counterself, the one who not only appropriates the other's identity as his own, but constructs Philip's as well. "I know your books inside out," he tells Philip when they first meet. "I know your life inside out. I could be your biographer. I am your biographer." He appears as Philip's dopplegänger, the chaotic reality behind the well-crafted sentences: "I AM THE YOU THAT IS NOT WORDS." Here Pipik becomes for Philip the flesh and blood embodiment of the fictional double, stripped of any possible linguistic subtext and in control of his own destiny. Unlike the characters that populate Philip's novels, Pipik has the potential to create problems for the author that the author does not bring on himself. He is, for Roth the novelist, a creation that helps delineate as well as recreate—much like a biographer—the life of Philip, the novelist's fictional surrogate. Pipik's relationship with Philip, in conjunction with the mock-confessional premise of the novel, places into question any traditional notions of autobiography in that Philip/Roth is as much determined by his creation as he determines it.

Almost from the beginning, Philip is both attracted to and repulsed by his double. At times he assumes a passive acceptance of Pipik, thinking him a ridiculous but nonetheless harmless neurotic, and at others he is consumed by a manic desire to annihilate him. Whatever the case, as long as Pipik remains alive he poses a threat to Philip's tenuous mental state, thereby causing him to "dwell in the house of Awabagity forever." The only way Philip can gain control over the entire situation is for him to become the "counterlife" of Pipik (who is himself a counterself to Philip), to reimagine or re-create the existence of his nemesis. He does this by doing what he does best: turning Pipik into a parody. The writer muses, "In pseudonymy is his anonymity, and it's that anonymity that's killing me. Name him!" It is the naming that is so significant here. Philip chooses the name "Moishe Pipik," which translates from Yiddish into "Moses Bellybutton." It's a name that Roth's family used to designate a ridiculous, funny, but nonetheless innocuous character—significantly enough, one that isn't real—and it gets its effect from being two dissimilar and antithetical words yoked together: Moses, the Jewish lawyer, juxtaposed to bellybutton, a purposeless anatomical mark. After he signifies his double into something completely absurd, Philip feels that "never had anybody seemed less of a menace to me or a more pathetic rival for my birthright. He struck me instead as a great idea...yes, a great idea breathing with life!"

Here, Philip engages in yet another act of transubstantiation where the flesh is made word—the opposite of what Pipik had attempted when he called himself the Philip "that is not words"—this time so that he may begin to free himself.

The name Moishe Pipik takes on an even deeper meaning when viewed in the context of ethnicity. Very early in his career, and contrary to what many of his critics believed, Roth was uncertain about the direction of the contemporary American Jew. In *Goodbye Columbo*, Neil Klugman was caught between the assimilated world of the Patimkins and the more ethnically rooted life in Newark, yet for all the material promise of Short Hills, the sights and smells of his Newark neighborhood seemed more real and in many ways more attractive to him. In "Eli, the Fanatic," another fable of the double, Roth's privileging of his ethnic roots is even more apparent. When Eli puts on the greenhorn's black Eastern European garb, he feels himself transformed and connected to some part of his ethnic past. He is overcome by the "blackness" and it becomes a fixed part of his identity, so much so in fact that when the orderlies attempt to anesthetize Eli, "the drug calmed his soul, but it did not touch it down where the blackness had reached."
tion Shylock there is a remnant of origin that leads to nowhere and is nothing more than a meaningless trace. The “pipik,” as Roth describes it, is “the silliest, blankest, stupidest watermark that could have been devised for a species with a brain like ours. It might as well have been the omphalos at Delphi given the enigma the pipik presented. Exactly what was your pipik trying to tell you? Nobody could every really figure it out. You were left with only the word, the delightful playword itself, the sonic prankishness of the two syllabic pops and the closing click encasing those peepingly meekish, unb turbiously shlemielish twin vowels.”

Roth may not make the same kind of overt ethnic link as he did with the circumcised penis in The Counterlife, but it is not too difficult to see the symbolic significance of the bellybutton. Here, Roth has taken the postmodern problem of identity and origin, and placed it within the context of ethnicity. The flesh, this time associated with his Jewishness (especially in being paired with the central figure of the Torah), is once more turned into word, a playful oral event made up of “syllabic pops” and “clicks.” Like the circumcised penis, the bellybutton is a signifying mark, but unlike circumcision it suggests more of an absence than a presence. For Zuckerman, circumcision is a unifying act, one acknowledging a male individual’s place within the ethnic community. The bellybutton, on the other hand, is nothing more than an anatomical relic of a once-present connection to the womb. Similar to a physical link to the nurturing body being severed at birth, any cohesive and unified understanding of ethnic identity, especially as it springs from a myriad of voices within the Jewish community, is called into question. Whereas in earlier metafictional works such as My Life as a Man or The Ghost Writer Roth had either marginalized his Jewishness or used it as a vehicle to disarm his critics, here he directly confronts his ethnicity by using a style that had once allowed him to confront his aesthetics. His ethnic aesthetics have shifted from a modernist focus on origin and depth to a postmodern privileging of surface and dissemination. He has moved from souls to bellybuttons.

Philip’s sense of identity is never static. He defines himself, and is defined by others both within and outside of his ethnic community, through a series of unlikely binaries such as Zionist and Diasporist, prophet and pariah, comedian and straight man, many times all at once. In other words, Philip becomes a “post-subject” whose sense of self is constantly deferred and resists closure. The text reflects an intermediacy or a betweenness, but it is important to note that the various dialogues in the book are contextualized within the disintegrated subject, Philip, and that they are never fully resolved. Such a dialogical emphasis on subjectivity gives the text a rather postmodern quality. “Where is Philip Roth?” Philip asks at one point, “Where did he go?” What is more, this “crisis” is inextricably linked to his ethnicity. It is the Pipik-inspired subject of Israel—the question of how Jews should best define themselves—that casts Philip into an identity vortex. This becomes apparent when he speaks with his old friend, George Ziad—significantly enough, a Palestinian nationalist—and finds himself easily slipping into the role of Pipik: “On I went, usurping the identity of the usurper who had usurped mine, heedless of truth, liberated from all doubt, assured of the indisputable rightness of my cause—seer, savior, very likely the Jews’ Messiah.” In this context, it is no accident that once again the bellybutton, or the pipik, becomes one of the most striking images in Operation Shylock. The bellybutton can be seen as one of our most primitive links to identity. It is the remnant of a connection that once provided us with life and bound us to our (parental and ethnic) history. But as with Philip’s unlikely double, it represents something that is both there and not there. The bellybutton, the “scar” of identity, no more determines the self than do authorized or fixed notions of Jewishness. As Philip learns, not only can he easily slip into alternate identities when the need arises, but when confronted with a destabilizing force such as Pipik, he undergoes a crisis where he is forced to question his own identity as an author writing for the general public and as a Jew. Meeting Pipik for the first time, Philip is profoundly struck by the identical appearance of the two of them, right down to the threadbare elbows of gray herringbone jacket that both men sport, and realizes that “everything inexplicable became even more inexplicable, as though what we were missing were our navels” (emphasis added). Philip’s identity is usurped—or in a deconstructive sense, deferred—by one who believes himself to be a modern-day Moses, the grand patriarch who embodies Judaism.

Roth again addresses the question of ethnicity in the classroom scene where Philip tries unsuccessfully to translate from Hebrew the telling passage from Genesis inscribed on the blackboard, “So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak” (which also serves as one of the book’s epigraphs). He reminisces about Hebrew school and realizes that, despite its many drawbacks, it is nonetheless central to his identity: “What could possibly come of those three or four hundred hours of the worst possible teaching in the
worst possible atmosphere for learning? Why, everything—what came of it was everything! . . . Yes, all and everything had originated there, including Moishe Pipik.73 These last words are telling, for as Roth makes clear throughout the text, Pipik (the man as well as the bellybutton) represents something in the process of erasure. The nostalgic reverie is undermined from the outset. At the very moment that Philip is reaching back to what he believes is an ethnically defining beginning, he is nonetheless unable to translate the letters on the blackboard, the very letters he once learned in the Hebrew school. If, as Roth states, Philip’s understanding of the ethnic community and his place in it spring from his time in that religious classroom (and one may assume, by association, other ethnic experiences that the young Philip may have undergone), then his inability to decipher the Hebrew script suggests a problem in acquiring any sense of a unified identity. What Philip may not realize, and what Roth the author understands all too well, is the dubiousness of fixed meanings and points of origins, especially as it relates to notions of self.

One of the last speeches in the book—and the text is filled with speeches—underscores the unanchored and heteroglossic nature of identity, in particular ethnic identity. Smilesburger, the deceptive and enigmatic instigator of Operation Shylock, tries to persuade Philip not to publish the book, Operation Shylock, by preaching on the underlying causes of Jewish conflict:

The divisiveness is not just between Jew and Jew—it is within the individual Jew. Is there a more manifold personality in all the world? I don’t say divided. Divided is nothing. Even the goyim are divided. But inside every Jew there is a mob of Jews. The good Jew, the bad Jew. The new Jew, the old Jew. The lover of Jews, the hater of Jews. The friend of the goy, the enemy of the goy. The arrogant Jew, the wounded Jew, the pious Jew, the rascal Jew, the coarse Jew, the gentle Jew. The defiant Jew, the appealing Jew. The Jewish Jew, the de-Jewed Jew. Do I have to expound upon the Jew as a three-thousand-year amassment of mirrored fragments to one who has made his fortune as a leading Jewologist of international literature? Is it any wonder that the Jew is always disputing? He is a dispute, incarnate.74

As with almost every other speech in the book, here is Roth, or one of the voices of Roth, disclosing with force what his characters are often slow to realize. Other speeches—those by Moishe Pipik, George Zad, Aharon Appellfeld, Jinx Possesski, David Supposnik, even Philip himself—express varying if not outright contrary views on the subject of the Jew. These also are the voices of Roth. Like Philip’s successor, Mickey Sabbath, Roth slips on the puppets in this “confessional theater” and gives voice to the mob of Jews inside of him. In a text that explores the writing of the self, especially the ethnic writing of the self, it is of no small significance that author and subject are conflated. Both the author and the text itself serve as case studies in the fluidity of subjectivity. What makes Smilesburg’s speech stand out is its centrality to Roth’s project, its critique on ethnic identity. Even Philip—probably the most intimate of Roth’s voices in the text—realizes the importance of the Mossad agent when he admits to himself, “Smilesburger is my kind of Jew, he is what Jew is to me, the best of it to me.”75 Perhaps this is why Philip follows his advice on publication, “Let your Jewish conscience be your guide,” and fails to include the “Operation Shylock” chapter of Operation Shylock.76 As with the text of the self, the written text in front of the reader both is and isn’t there.

Overall, the entire book reads as an exercise in public relations, an elaborate PR game of texts and lives whose objectives are nothing less than a grand duplicity. It is a deceptive act, a bit of “Jewish mischief,” that engages the reader in a seductive plot (in both the sense of story and secret plan) that is never fully realized, and makes of him an accomplice to the fact. In engaging the text, the reader by association becomes a participant in the deceptive act of fiction making. As a result, Operation Shylock stands as the most successful of Roth’s post-Zuckerman works, and one of his most ambitious efforts to date. Not only does he parallel the issues of textual authority and identity construction, at the same time he places them alongside the problems of nationality and Jewish identity.77 With all of these issues there are never any complete resolutions, but by confronting them together Roth shows that the realm of the written world is not entirely disengaged from that of the unwritten world. This, in many ways, is an answer to Philip Dodd’s anxiety over the hermetic quality of contemporary autobiography-as-fiction. As O’Donnell and Shostak have suggested, Roth does indeed seem to reject the nihilistic impulse in much postmodern writing by redefining “reality” as a process of ongoing construction. The language may be duplicitous, but it is no more duplicitous than lived reality itself. In fact, Roth concludes, reality is even less centered than language and texts. During one of his interviews, Appellfeld, the survivor of an unimaginable destruction of life, confides to Philip that “Reality, as you know, is
always stronger than the human imagination. Not only that, reality can permit itself to be unbelievable, inexplicable, out of all proportion. The created work, to my regret, cannot permit itself all that.”66 These, one could argue, are—almost—Roth’s words exactly. One way out of this query of reality, Operation Shylock so daringly suggests, is to constantly renegotiate the bellies of subjectivity, to engage the genres of autobiography and the novel in a mischievous dialogue of mutual definition.

Such a strategy, then, problematizes the “tell-all” qualities of biographies and autobiographies, such as Roth’s The Facts and Claire Bloom’s Leaving a Doll’s House. What is more, it foregrounds the art of writing the ethnic self. Regardless of whether or not Bloom’s memoir is accurate, whether or not it invites us into the personal lives of her and Philip Roth, and thereby sanctions or condemns their actions, readers should take from both Operation Shylock and Bloom’s book a cue to reinvestigate the construction of texts. Autobiography, as well as fiction, isn’t so much a window into the true lives of individuals as it is a glimpse into the ways in which the author constructs his or her reality. Bloom herself, working within the genre that most readers assume to be “true to reality,” engages in fiction much in the way that Roth does. In the final pages of her memoir, she relates the details of her last encounters with Roth, after the marriage had ended. Following a nervous meeting at a coffeehouse, Roth tells her, “I want our old life back,” and the two of them return to the house in Connecticut to begin anew. She ends this reverie with the words “I knew I had finally come home,” suggesting a point of closure to her life with Roth, a “they lived happily ever after” quality reminiscent of fairy tales.67 But, as Bloom tells us immediately after this episode, this happy ending is nothing but a fiction, a constructed finale that is not true, but which nonetheless gives us a possible clue as to what could be read as her own desires for the outcome of this relationship. What is more real: the actual event or the wish? In light of the nature of autobiography, it doesn’t matter. If we engage in the game of ferreting out “the real” from the imagined, we could wind up running in circles. The relationship between autobiography and fiction is most illustrative when it provides us with a means to observe how authors construct their reality, thereby their lives. Roth’s Operation Shylock provides us with a rich text in which to do so. It is indeed a “confession,” but one that tells us more about the self, and the very nature of narrative, than it does its subject.

Notes

15. Almost from the beginning of his career Roth has had to contend with the willed and unwilled fragmentation of his identity as both an author and a “character.” Two illuminating sources can be found in “Document Dated July 27, 1969,” Reading Myself and Others (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), 23–31, and the various interviews collected in Conversations with Philip Roth, ed. George J. Searles (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992).
16. 68, 58.
20. By placing Roth’s name in quotation marks, I am referring to the “Roth” who is the subject of his last four works, not to Roth the author of that constructed subject. In order to differentiate between Philip Roth the creator and “Philip Roth” the creation, I will from here on refer to the actual author as Roth (as I have throughout this essay) and the subject or protagonist of his works as Philip (without quotation marks for ease of reading).
23. My grouping is similar to that of Harold Bloom’s, who also reads these texts as a tetralogy, and at odds with Elaine M. Kauvar’s, who excludes *Deception* from this list in favor of a trilogy. In an otherwise insightful essay on Roth’s psychology of the self, Kauvar is conspicuously silent on *Deception’s* place within the autobiographical writings. What is more, she misinterprets Bloom’s textual grouping, claiming it to include *The Counterlife, The Facts, Patrimony,* and *Operation Shylock* (when in fact Bloom sees the earlier work as a precursor to the autobiographical tetralogy).
24. Roth actually underwent a serious bout of depression in 1987. Although the conditions of this breakdown are identical to those revealed in Philip’s letter, the difference between the two is again the difference between Roth’s written and unwritten worlds. The very act of writing the incident on a page transforms it into narrative, text, the “written” world.
26. Ibid., 111, 112.
27. Ibid., 162.
28. Ibid., 192.
29. Ibid., 5.
30. By “counterself” I do not mean to imply the textual self that runs counter or differs from the authorial self. Such a designation would suggest the very binary that Roth attempts to discard. The counterself is a self that appears in the text (or written world), but it does not necessarily contradict, erase, or mimic its author. It suggests fluidity between author and subject, a relationship that is more symbiotic than in traditional narratives. Just as the “real” self is socially and personally constructed, the counterself is inscribed upon the page.
32. In another effort to avoid confusion, I will refer to the impersonator or “fake” Philip Roth as Pipik, the name given to him by Philip early in the story.
33. In light of Roth’s play between fact and fiction, it is significant to note that the purportedly real Wanda Jane Posseski makes a brief appearance in his next book, *Sabbath’s Theater*. In this work, a text with no claims to be anything other than fiction, Mickey Sabbath describes her as his dying lover’s nurse, “a good-natured bonbon blond named Jules.” In *Sabbath’s Theater* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 115.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid., 199.
37. Ibid., 238.
38. Ibid., 561.
39. Ibid., 387.
40. In her memoir, Claire Bloom states that *Operation Shylock* was completed in winter of 1992, meaning that the *Demjjanjuk* trial was still underway as Roth was writing his book. The implication here is that the unresolved and ongoing Demjjanjuk trial served as an appropriate backdrop for the ambiguous undertellings of Roth’s text.
42. Ibid., 87.
43. Ibid., 55.
44. Ibid., 178.
45. Ibid., 73.
46. Ibid., 87.
47. Ibid., 302. This allusion to the end of Psalm 23 is just one of the many intertexts that appear throughout the book. Among the others are references to Henry James’s “House of Fiction,” *The Ghost Writer, The Diary of Anne Frank*, “Eli, the Fanatic,” and (obviously) Dostoyevsky’s *The Double*.
49. Ibid., 83.
52. Ibid., 22.
53. Ibid., 156.
54. Ibid., 76; emphasis mine.
55. Ibid., 312.
56. Ibid., 334.
57. Ibid., 394.
58. Ibid., 398.
59. Ibid., 398.
60. Cynthia Ozick, for these reasons as well as others, was quite effusive in her praise of the book, calling it “the Great American Jewish Novel” and Roth “the boldest American writer alive.” Interview with Elaine M. Kauvar, *Contemporary Literature* 34 (1993): 394, 370.
61. *OS*, 68.