

## The Perils of Desire in Roth's Early Fiction

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**Victoria Aarons,**  
**"The Perils of Desire in Roth's Early Fiction"**  
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**Abstract:** In her article "The Perils of Desire in Roth's Early Fiction" Victoria Aarons posits that Philip Roth's first collection of stories *Goodbye, Columbus* is the prototype for a host of characters who emerge throughout his oeuvre: characters who are engaged as the inveterate Nathan Zuckerman insists, in "an exchange of existences" abandoning willingly "the artificial fiction" of an inherent, essential self." From the stories in *Goodbye, Columbus* to the "final" novels comprising the *Nemesis* tetralogy, Roth's characters perform a spectacle of selves engaged in the making of character. The making of character in Roth's fiction appears in two ways: 1) the developing of protagonists who emerge throughout the trajectory of Roth's extensive literary career and 2) each protagonist's individual psychic project of making himself his own favorite character. For Roth, character is all about motive, those oppositional and ambivalent impulses which drive people to perform acts of desperate self-assertion, all part of the masquerade of self-reinvention.

## Victoria AARONS

### The Perils of Desire in Roth's Early Fiction

When Nathan Marx, the conflicted protagonist of Philip Roth's 1959 short story "Defender of the Faith," concedes that "there are strategies of aggression, but there are strategies of retreat as well" (194), he exposes something seductively duplicitous about himself, his motives, and his behavior. This startling epiphany, which comes to him "with the force of indictment" not only exposes him as something of an imposter, but also confirms his deepest suspicions about himself: his apprehensive evasions and equivocations, his defended tactics of avoidance, and his instinctive acts of betrayal (194). Here, in this early short story, Roth sets the stage for the performance of the divided self, the push and pull of conflicting desires and prohibitions that will plague Roth's characters forever after. In exposing his deep ambivalences and conscious and unconscious stratagems, Nathan Marx, not unlike the other characters in Roth's first collection of stories, *Goodbye, Columbus*, emerges as the nascent prototype for Roth's parade of characters, all engaged, as the inveterate Nathan Zuckerman insists, in "an exchange of existences," willingly abandoning, as Zuckerman maintains, "the artificial fiction" of an inherent, essential self, "for the genuine, satisfying falseness of being somebody else" (*The Counterlife* 156, 77). From the emerging stories in *Goodbye, Columbus* to the "final" novels comprising the *Nemesis* tetralogy, Roth's characters perform a spectacle of selves, calling upon, as Zuckerman would have it, "a troupe of players that [one has] internalized, a permanent company of actors that [one] can call upon when a self is required, an ever-evolving stock of pieces and parts that forms [one's] repertoire" (367). With an extravagant sleight of hand, they conjure a ventriloquy of selves, and with considerable pageantry each "struts and frets his hour upon the stage" all the while anxiously engaged in the making of character. The making of character, I suggest, takes center stage in Roth's fiction in two senses: 1) the developing of protagonists who emerge throughout the trajectory of Roth's extensive literary career and 2) each protagonist's individual psychic project of making himself his own favorite character. For Roth, character is all about motive, those oppositional and ambivalent impulses which drive people to perform ingeniously choreographed acts of inspired and often desperate self-assertion. Unlike Shakespeare's "poor player ... heard no more," however, Roth's protagonists return and with each subsequent production — from *Goodbye, Columbus* to *Portnoy's Complaint*, *The Ghost Writer*, *The Counterlife*, *Sabbath's Theater*, *The Human Stain*, *Everyman*, *Exit Ghost*, and *Nemesis* — Roth's wily protagonists perform the spectacle of the expansive, seemingly limitless contortions and deceptions involved in refashioning, reinventing, impersonating, and re-impersonating that most dodgy, preposterous, and profligate player: the transitory, capricious, traitorous self.

Stepping out of one life and inhabiting another — if only temporarily — has been Roth's project all along. For, as Adam Phillips suggests, for Roth "what you inherit is what you have to get rid of" (174). In the preface to the thirtieth anniversary edition of *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories*, Roth, referring to himself in the third-person — that is, creating himself as his own favorite character — describes retrospectively the young malleable writer who, in casting off the provincial upbringing of his lower-middle-class life in the insularity of Newark's Jewish neighborhoods, "moving beyond the unsubtle locutions and coarse simplifications of the families still living where he'd grown up, a tiny provincial enclosure where there was no longer room for the likes of him," finds himself, not unlike the nascent Nathan Marx and the host of uneasy characters who follow him, torn, pulled between competing impulses: the heady urge to run and the aching desire to stay ("Preface" xiii). To this end, Roth describes the ambitious young writer's ambivalence: "he proceeded to make identical the acts of departure and return and to perpetrate those contradictory yearnings that can perplex the emotions of an ambitious embryo — the desire to repudiate and the desire to cling, a sense of allegiance and the need to rebel, the alluring dream of escaping into the challenging unknown and the counterdream of holding fast to the familiar" ("Preface" xiii-xiv). Such ambivalences, equivocations, and "contradictory yearnings," lead, as Nathan Marx would have it, to those "strategies of aggression" and "strategies of retreat" that characterize the sometimes contrived and more often than not unconscious maneuvers of Roth's protagonists, from Nathan Marx, Neil Klugman, and Eli Peck in *Goodbye, Columbus* to Henry and Nathan Zuckerman, Mickey Sabbath, Coleman Silk, and Bucky Cantor. Such ambivalences and antimonies — the ongoing and unconscious battles played out between the unruly id and the moderat-

ing, restraining superego — show themselves in the tensions between competing desires and impulses, all aspects of the conflicting need to depart and to return, the push-pull of desire mediated by anxiety and deep unease: aggression and retreat, allegiance and rebellion, impulsiveness and caution, escape and "holding fast to the familiar," repudiation and the deep-seated "desire to cling." The question for Roth's characters is how to negotiate these contradictory impulses and yearnings and how to get away with it. While Roth's protagonists convince themselves that they try to "do only the right thing, the right thing and the right thing and the right thing ... to be a thoughtful person, a personable person, an accommodating person" (*Nemesis* 47), such determined assurances are undermined by the cunning "ghost of ... desire" (*Exit Ghost* 66).

Indeed, Roth's protagonists are caught between the competing desire to depart, on the one hand from a life that no longer "fits," a life that seems to have worn out its possibilities, delimited by its banality, that is, psychoanalytically, by its inevitable trajectory toward death and, on the other hand, a desire to return, to hold fast to that which is familiar and safe: forward movement and then retreat. And the retreat, the return to one's own history, in which, as Nathan Zuckerman says, one's own "natural ... irreducible ... rather small," and largely insignificant "self" plays only a minor part, is displaced onto the imagination, a transference onto the page: a homecoming, that is, through the telling of stories, the making of characters who can play out and hope to resolve such tensions (*The Counterlife* 366). As Roth suggests, his return to the sounds, preoccupations, and both psychical and psychological points of origin and departure was negotiated through and buffered by the making of fictions: what was once cast off could now be ushered back in, transformed into productive, socially acceptable conduct, providing therapeutic license to indulge in otherwise unacceptable betrayals and transgression. Roth, through the creation of other selves, "counterlives," achieved in a way what his protagonists could not: to balance the conflicting impulses of recklessness and restraint, "to reimagine ... the undifferentiated everydayness of Jewish life along the route of Newark's Number 14 Clinton Place bus ... to make identical the acts of departure and return ... activat[ing] the ambivalence that was to stimulate his imagination for years to come and establish the grounds for that necessary struggle from which his — no, my — fiction would spring" ("Preface" xiv). Roth's protagonists' desire to transform suffocating banality into the intoxicating openness of possibility attempts to defy the limitations of history and inheritance, a tactic of avoidance motivated, in large part, by the fear of being "impaled," as is the most unhappy Simon Axler, on the "bewildering biography" that is at once bequeathed to him but also of his own "humble" making (*The Humbling* 138). In this way, every narrative is an act of devotion and affirmation, but also, as Phillips suggests, "every story is an act of betrayal," as it must be (168). For, as Nathan Zuckerman would have it, "the kind of stories that people turn life into, the kind of lives that people turn stories into" are symptomatic of the desire to renege on both history and character, that is, to avoid the backward and inward glance (*The Counterlife* 124).

But such avoidance requires complicated and self-parodic, destabilizing executions. For such self-deceptions are never easy. Constantly torn between the person they fear themselves to be — their intransigent comportment and "history" — and the person and the life willed into being by impetuous desire, Roth's protagonists, in their reckless desire "to wish what is into what is not," will attempt to rewrite themselves, to out-perform the actor they are trying to impersonate (*Exit Ghost* 273). Roth's characters have long been engaged in the performance of the self — or, more precisely, the performance of many selves. The fantasy of the invented self is symptomatic of the infantile desire to have it all, to secure and insure their invincibility, in other words, to stave off death. Such neurotic and largely self-indulgent fantasies often lead to the most implausible and self-serving yet self-defeating scenarios, as exhibited by Roth's Everyman in his willed insistence on his unassailability: "that he, with a lifelong regimen of healthful living, would end up as a candidate for cardiac surgery seemed preposterous. It was simply not how things were going to turn out," as if desire could be willed into being (42). Such reactive and regressive behavior, a denial of reality, shown here as elsewhere as a childish defiance of death, requires exorbitant and profligate feats of impersonation, for defiance, defiance of the constraints of the lives we inhabit — "the tyranny of contingency," as Arnie Mesnikoff, the narrator of *Nemesis* would have it — opens itself to extreme acts of impersonation (243). As the persistent Nathan Zuckerman insists, "one is acutely a performer"; the trick is to recognize it, something that Roth's protagonists routinely fail to do (*The Counterlife* 366). Such self-indulgent fantasies in the

face of reality are never a good idea in Roth's fictive landscape, and such willful defiance and disobedience will be punished. For Roth, one cannot occupy a position outside of history or character.

Self-impersonation can be hard work because it is executed in defiance of biography, history, and reality — "a powerful objection against the way you once lived," as Zuckerman cautions his deluded brother, Henry — performed in front of an audience not only of others but of one, the one who won't, finally, go away, the disapproving, censoring super-ego for whom Roth's characters can never get it quite right (*The Counterlife* 156). Thus, constantly reinventing selves can be exhausting, not in the least because it requires the invention of a counter-existence that can be maintained only in defiance of or in opposition to the fixed parameters of both one's own singular limitations and the constraints of one's times, "irrefutable historical proof, gleaned during a lifetime passed on this planet," as the narrator of *Nemesis* ruefully acknowledges (264). One can't win skirmishes with reality, Roth seems to remind us, and the exhaustion that inevitably results from "the exchange of existences," not unlike "after a great war, the exchange of prisoners," as Nathan Zuckerman well knows, can be debilitating, "one long" and often tedious "performance" (156). Roth's characters may well be artful dodgers, but eventually, as the narrator of *Everyman* comes regrettably to admit, "There's no remaking reality. Just take it as it comes. Hold your ground and take it as it comes" (5). Such advice either comes belatedly or is unheeded by Roth's protagonists. But, in any event, the ground will not hold. Propelled in large part by "the terror of the unforeseen," Roth's protagonists will run from one set of contingencies, one existence, to counter existences, counterlives (*The Plot* 114). They will run, that is, *from* themselves — or from the self they believe they inhabit, an escape invested with, as Nathan Zuckerman suggests, "all the aspects of an hallucination" (*The Counterlife* 365) — only to find themselves, ironically, back where they began, "strategies of aggression ... strategies of retreat."

Such "strategies of aggression" and "strategies of retreat" are symptomatic of Roth's divided, deeply conflicted, fictive selves. For Roth's protagonists, coming into oneself, acknowledging and living with oneself, "accepting [one's] fate," as Nathan Marx recognizes, is no safe passage ("Defender" 200). And here, in his vacillation between two conflicting "selves," Nathan Marx sets the stage for the push and pull of contradictory and competing desires and loyalties that will motivate Roth's characters throughout the long trajectory of his literary career. For Marx, having cultivated by necessity an "infantryman's heart, which, like his feet, at first aches and swells but finally grows horny enough for him to travel the weirdest paths without feeling a thing," will, in that fraught spring of 1945, be reminded of the person he might have become had the war not intervened ("Defender" 162). Sergeant Marx, responsible for a squadron of soldiers dispatched to a training company at Camp Crowder, Missouri, upon his return to the states, finds himself set upon by the self-serving, manipulative Sheldon Grossbart, who will use all the resources available to him, including his presumed cultural consanguinity with his commanding officer, for his own self-serving interests. Marx, despite his well-defended military detachment and neutrality and his better judgment, will come to assume responsibility for the Jewish personnel in his company. Such an alignment is scarcely to his liking. For the soldier in him, having been hardened by "the trembling of the old people, the crying of the very young, the uncertainty and fear in the eyes of the once arrogant," "the dying," will resist the pull of kinship and shared history (161, 170). His divided loyalties will, momentarily, be his undoing. Torn between what he believes to be right and proper conduct and the pull of emotion, the nostalgic and largely infantile innocence and longing for a time before war, before the imposed clarity of human motives and behavior, Marx's well-honed impartial and dispassionate military posture will show itself to be a convenient masquerade. His concealment, his retreat into the mask of dispassionate objectivity, will collapse in the face of an obligation far more entrenched than his proximate circumstances. For in the darkening light of one wistful spring evening among the young men under his charge, Marx will throw off the protective amour of soldierly restraint and return to being the self he thought he had dispatched. Goaded by the crafty, self-serving Sheldon Grossbart, whom we both applaud for his chutzpah and disparage for his manipulative, opportunistic ploys, Marx will return to his origins; he will acknowledge his essential Jewishness, acknowledge that, "like Karl and Harpo, I was one of them" (165).

And, although Marx has convinced himself that he had, by necessity, reinvented himself and "changed enough" as he sped through Germany pushing "eastward until we'd circled the globe, marching through villages" inured to the pervasive suffering and defeat, all it takes for the wavering Marx to capitulate to his former "self" is Grossbart's evocative call of "Good *shabbus*, sir!" in the dim-

ming light of evening's summons to the Sabbath (161). As Marx admits, Grossbart's redolent and intrusive beckoning "suddenly touched a deep memory ... a reverie so strong that I felt as though a hand were reaching down inside me. It had to reach so very far to touch me! But now one night noise, one rumor of home and time past, and memory plunged down through all I had anesthetized, and came to what I suddenly remembered was myself" (170). Thus Nathan Marx, in aggressive military mode for so long, driven by the need to repudiate a Jewish past that seems precarious and transitory, will ultimately capitulate to the call of an allegiance that connects him to a history far more entrenched than his present circumstances. Torn between conflicting loyalties and desires, Marx will yield to the security and comforting embrace of the familiar; he will come, though haltingly, to recognize that his desire to reinvent himself, to cast aside his history, is thwarted by, as Roth put it, "the counterdream of holding fast to the familiar" ("Preface" xiv). Marx will take an aggressive stance toward the Jewish personnel in his squadron, denying them any suspicion of "special treatment," but then, confronted by the demands of kinship and arrested by longing and a desire, if only fantasized, to return to an imagined past, he will retreat. He will pull back and momentarily relent, yielding to the self he believed himself to have cast off. In the context of military life — its requirements and demands — Marx will purposefully follow the prescribed manner of comportment. What is purported to be fair and egalitarian, however, is a thinly veiled cover for latent anti-Semitism or, at best, ignorance and suspicion. And so Marx finds himself, scarcely to his liking, defending the indefensible Sheldon Grossbart, who, in infantile rebellion from the rules as upheld by the initially unyielding Nathan Marx, will impulsively demand, "I can't stop being me, that's all there is to it" ("Defender" 188). But of course he can. The "I" in Roth's calculation is ever contingent upon the self that is being impersonated, the ever-changing, liquid guise.

In ironic defiance of any easy return, a characteristically Rothian resistance to closure, Nathan Marx will pull back once again. Recognizing himself duped by the dishonest and fraudulent Grossbart, by his own childlike fantasies, and by the soothing melodies of the romance of return, Marx, not unlike Roth's Everyman, arrested by "remorse" for his "stupid, inescapable mistakes," will go in aggressive pursuit of Grossbart (158). Like all Roth's protagonists, Marx will vacillate uncomfortably between postures of aggression and modes of retreat in an attempt to exercise some control over his unrestrained emotions and his insidious fear of those unpredictable and uncontrollable impulses that will take him out of himself, out of, that is, the "officially authorized version" of the self that one outwardly projects. While aggression is an attempt to deflect and conceal one's fear, so, too, is retreat, the impulse to run. Marx will retreat, will return, in a moment of vulnerability, to the "faith"; he will, in other words, sublimate his defiant, disobedient tendencies. However, his faithful return is short-lived, for the conflicted Marx ultimately cannot control his aggression, his need to retaliate, and his need to subjugate, and thus at the story's close, he gets even with the scheming Grossbart, who almost unmoored him, and he sends them all — Grossbart and the Jewish personnel along with the rest of the soldiers — to their fates in the Pacific. In doing so, Marx accepts his "own [fate]" and he comes to recognize something scandalously tantalizing about himself, the satisfaction he takes in his capacity for betrayal and conquest. Throughout "Defender of the Faith," Marx, characteristic of Roth's protagonists, is caught between his impetuous and regressively reactive impulses and the need to sublimate such impulsive behavior, to sublimate desire and thus transform fearful and negative emotions into productive behavior. The "strategies of aggression" executed routinely by Roth's protagonists in an attempt to play-out their fantasized lives suggests the failure of sublimation. Characteristic of the host of Roth's conflicted characters is this forward and backward motion: forward movement and then retreat, "strategies of aggression" countered and undermined by "strategies of retreat." The sublimation of desire does not sit well or for long with Roth's protagonists, however, for the welling up of desire is irresistible. When repression is weakened or strong-armed by desire, as it so often is, Roth's characters revert to their aggressive, and more often than not regressive, drives to try to attenuate the divided self. Thus Roth's characters retreat and sublimate their unacceptable impulses only to go in aggressive pursuit of them.

Such equivocation is nowhere more blatantly apparent than in the comically performed construction of another of Roth's early characters, the unstable Eli Peck, in the short story "Eli, the Fanatic" in *Goodbye, Columbus*. Peck, attorney and protector of a status quo that maintains a dubious compliance between gentiles and Jews in the town of Woodenton, New York, in the aftermath of World War II, is

the paradigm of the Rothian divided, conflicted self, so much so that Eli sees in himself his double, the figure of the Holocaust survivor who is "the source of Woodenton's upset" and who Eli both runs from and pursues (253). The refugee from the Shoah represents Eli's fear and his divided loyalties. For Eli has taken on an untenable, ironic mission: to make the Yeshiva and its inhabitants "disappear." Their very presence in the community, "long ... the home of well-to-do Protestants," calls unwanted attention to Eli and his Jewish neighbors who only recently have been allowed "to buy property here" and "to give up some of their more extreme practices," to live, that is, as gentiles (262). The Jews of Woodenton fixate their fear and antipathy on the refugee dressed in traditional Jewish garb, the survivor who "wears" his Jewishness for all to see: "What a nerve, what a nerve" (253). And thus, Eli intrudes upon the sanctuary of the Yeshiva in a reactive, misguided, and hysterical imperative to "get the one with the hat," a directive that makes Eli want to run for cover (253). Even Eli cannot be pacified by his preposterous attempts to vindicate his ill-conceived trespass. His feeble insistence that "this is, after all, the twentieth century," only makes emphatic the reality of the times in which they live in the direct aftermath of a war that would annihilate Europe's Jews (261).

Eli, his psyche in something of a shambles at the outset, equivocates as the story progresses between pursuit and retreat. Ducking behind a pillar on the grounds of the Yeshiva, Eli is on the run not only from the black-clad, black-hatted Jew, the displaced Holocaust survivor whose difference threatens the assimilated, middle-class Jews of Woodenton, but also from Leo Tzuref, headmaster of the newly formed Yeshiva and his refugee band of eighteen orphans who have lost their families in the Holocaust and have taken precarious sanctuary in the town. Eli is in full retreat mode. Panicky and deeply phobic, Eli withdraws behind a pillar of the old mansion-turned-Yeshiva. He is in hiding, of course, from himself, from his strained conscience and from the weight of conflicting obligations and identifications that he cannot quite face ("Eli" 280). Defended against the pull of obligation and empathy, Eli will attempt to take on the intrepid Leo Tzuref, the sentry for his displaced and bereft troupe of survivors and the admonishing guardian of "Jewishness," the "law" of "the heart. . . God!" (266). But the faltering Eli Peck, armed with briefcase and the statute of civil codes to remove the Yeshiva from suburban Woodenton, is no match for this indomitable adversary, who speaks in riddles and makes demands on Eli's conscience, and neither are the legalities and zoning ordinances prohibiting "a boarding school in a residential area" (251). Eli, conflicted spokesperson for the "progressive suburban community," buffered by the indefensible propriety of the law and driven by the anxiety of the suburban Jews who already live in apprehensive and uneasy scrutiny among their gentile neighbors — "no pogroms in Woodenton ... just people who respect each other, and leave each other be" — capitulates in the face of Tzuref's admonitions (261, 277-78).

Armored uncomfortably against the pull of conscience and Tzuref's censorious insistence that Eli "Stop with the law!" Eli's capricious resolve will falter (265). Confronted by the punitive super-ego in the guise of Leo Tzuref, survivor of the Shoah, Eli, in reactive fear of failure, will run from the punishing "father," who makes demands on his feeble character and conscience, and from the children who, on the grounds of the Yeshiva, unlike Eli, recognize a threat when they see one and, ironically, tragically, will flee at the sight of the nervous, fearful, and faltering Eli: "They're scared, so they run," Eli is chastised by Tzuref, whose shrug appears to Eli as "strong as an accusation" (263). Eli fears being cast out. He fears being exiled from, on the one hand, the security afforded by the approbation of his assimilated Jewish neighbors and their safe community and, on the other, banished from the tribe, from a history larger and with more moral weight than his own. This very Jewish fear of banishment is the motivation for his erratic and impulsive behavior. Such anxious instability will show itself symptomatically in Eli's hasty and surreptitious retreat, not only from the grounds of the Yeshiva and the weight of its ancient and proximate history, but from his own, now undefended, ego.

Eli cannot maintain the aggressive demands he brings to Tzuref to desist from running a Yeshiva in a residential area. Neither can he insist that the "greenie," an adult survivor whose Orthodox attire ("the one with the hat ... the black coat that fell down below the man's knees ... the round-topped, wide-brimmed Talmudic hat ... the beard ... his sidelocks") both frightens and offends the Jews of Woodenton, exchange his clothes for those more befitting the "assimilated," modern Jew (253). Vacillating in his loyalties and allegiances, Eli conceals himself, disappearing behind the column only to materialize warily no longer buttressed by his standing in the community or his legal rightness. But, at the sight of the "man with the suit," the man who, as Tzuref earlier admonishes Eli, has lost every-

thing - "a wife ... a baby ... a village full of friends ... a synagogue ... That leaves nothing ... Absolutely nothing!" - and he makes a dash for the mistaken safety of the town (264). Exiled in the darkness of the Yeshiva grounds, Eli, ironically, believes himself to be persecuted and so he will hide momentarily "in the shadows" (253). Pursued relentlessly by his own dread and flailing resolve in a desperate strategy of misguided retreat from the inhabitants of the Yeshiva and from himself, Eli finds himself fleeing from the censuring gaze of those who have been hunted "toward the lights" of Woodenton (268).

Roth's Eli Peck is trapped between his ambivalent convictions of rightness and his loyalties, on the one hand, to his assimilated Jewish neighbors and friends and, on the other, to the bereaved and dispossessed Jewish victims of the Holocaust. And so Eli swaps clothes with the Orthodox Jew and becomes the object of the townspeople's aversion and fear. Cowed by his failure of character, Eli can only come to recognize his own thinly veiled and cowardly motives in yielding to the demands of the townspeople and insisting on the indefensible. But Eli is also impeded by the failure of the sublimated self, the inability to protect himself from his destructive impulses. In either case, Eli is oblivious to his misbehavior to what should be evident: that he has, like the accusation brought against Nathan Zuckerman at the close of *Exit Ghost*, "lost all sense of proportion and entered into a desperate story of unreasonable wishes" (291). Thus Eli scuttles back and forth, retreating only to thrust forth in a desperate attempt to assert himself. In trying to be strategic, Eli foils himself neurotically. These naïve, artless maneuvers will become more sophisticated — and in some ways more ingeniously desperate for Roth's later protagonists — but in these early stories, the prevaricating strategies of aggression and retreat played-out by Eli Peck, Nathan Marx, and others, expose the complicated motives brought on by the conflict of unconscious drives. Aggression meets retreat on the stage of Roth's fictive landscape. Here "strategies of aggression," for Roth's protagonists, reveal comically their overriding regressive and exhibitionistic tendencies: "strategies of retreat," the consequence of successful sublimation, a pulling back from aggression and destructive impulses. In this scheme, "strategies of retreat" mitigate against the destructive motives born out in "strategies of aggression." For, ultimately, sublimation would hope to result in an improved upon version of oneself, a counter-self, or as Zuckerman puts it, "the self that best gets one through" (*The Counterlife* 366). Sublimation, as a defense mechanism, is thus an unconscious antidote to being overcome by the kind of indiscriminate indulgences that emerge from uncontrollable desires. The sublimation of potentially ruinous desire is thus a safeguard against regression, against, that is, reverting to a psychological condition controlled by unconscious fears, anxieties, and impulses. Retreat mode is adaptive, an acceptable form of defense. Those aggressive, impulsive behaviors, the acting out of adverse and destructive urges, are regressive and, ultimately, self-defeating. Such drives, psychoanalytically, are mitigated by sublimating them, transforming such impulses into acceptable, livable behavior.

But such a convenient equation in Roth's fictive worlds does not hold. Which mode of conduct, for Roth, is regressive? In both "Eli, the Fanatic" and "Defender of the Faith" modes of aggression and retreat get confused, the one so deeply interconnected with the other that they cannot be distinguished. Is Nathan Marx acting aggressively when he capitulates to the entreaties of Sheldon Grossbart on behalf of the Jewish personnel, or when, feeling used, he sends them off to the front? Is Eli behaving aggressively when he intrudes upon the Yeshiva or when he dresses as the Holocaust survivor? Retreat, for Roth, is yet another form of concealment. For Eli, with the force of theatrical embellishment and excess, out-performs himself. He transforms himself into the "greenie": Eli, master imposter, impersonates the refugee from Europe's wreckage and wears the clothes of the displaced person, and, in doing so, attempts to replace himself. Roth's protagonists can neither conceal nor sublimate their desires. Eli, in effect, exchanges identities. He not only desists from battling the Yeshiva, but he embraces it excessively: he dons the clothes of the man in black, wearing them in defiance, but also in disguise — offensive and defensive measures. Once garbed in the "greenie's" attire, Eli struts through the town on display for all to see: "into the street ... came Eli Peck. It was not enough, he knew, to walk up one side of the street ... Instead he walked ... up one side, then on an angle, crossed to the other side ... and crossed back. Horns blew, traffic jerked, as Eli made his way up Coach House Road ... Everyone ... paused and gaped" (292). For what satisfaction is there in self-transformation if it can only be witnessed by an audience of one? Eli pulls back all the way. He performs with equally aggressive defiance and shoves it in his neighbors' faces. When asked by his hec-



toring neighbor "You know you're still Eli, don't you," the answer is by no means clear to him (297). Wearing the other man's clothes, "Eli had the strange notion that he was two people" (289). Eli is, of course, his own worst enemy. Which is the impersonation? Eli in his lawyerly guise, arrayed with briefcase and zoning ordinances or Eli the fanatic? At the story's close a "flailing," uncontrollable Eli donned in the black, Orthodox garb of the other man and his unwitting double is subdued, tranquilized by a drug that "calmed his soul, but did not touch it down where the blackness had reached" (298). In assuming an identity not his own, Eli invents a counter-existence, if only for the time it takes him to parade through town.

Such capers result in an exhibitionistic display of impersonations for Roth's disobediently impulsive and conflicted protagonists who attempt to assert themselves over their unstable landscapes. In many ways, of course, self-representation is always exhibitionistic because it requires a constant projection of the hyperbolized self to validate its reckless indiscretion, for, as Phillips suggests, "most of [Roth's] fictional heroes and some of his heroines know, there's no good performance — no performance, indeed — without indiscretion, or its possibility" (168). Thus, the young Ozzie Freedman, haphazardly driven to the roof of the synagogue by the rampaging Rabbi Binder, in the short story "The Conversion of the Jews," from his rooftop perch assesses not only the scene below, but also his own newly minted self. Ozzie, in defiance of the rules and strictures imposed upon him by rabbinical authority and in heady exultation of his new-found control, will put on a daring display for all to witness. For what fun is it to be careening around the roof if you do not have an audience to implore you to descend — "'Immediately!' Rabbi Binder was pointing one arm stiffly up at him; and at the end of that arm, one finger aimed menacingly" — or to hurdle yourself off into the air — "a single voice, a single young voice, shouted a lone word to the boy of the roof. 'Jump! ... Go ahead, Ozz — jump!'" (148, 153). And so Ozzie, not unlike Eli Peck's mad sashay about town, cavorts around the roof, careening from one side to another, back and forth, "scamper[ing] around the edge of the roof to the corner ... flapp[ing] his arms at his sides, swishing the air and smacking his palms to his trousers of the downbeat ... screaming like some kind of engine, 'Wheeee ... wheeeeeee,'" and leaning way out over the edge with the upper half of his body ... racing the other corner" in a slap-stick burlesque as the firemen with their net try to mirror his erratic movements from below, as Rabbi Binder, eyes covered, peers through his fingers, and Izzie, Ozzie's co-conspirator and disciple, cheers him on (152-53). "Prancing around on the roof," scampering back and forth from the edge in a mad caper, Ozzie is out of control (148). Metaphorically, such forward and aggressive movement and its reflexive, hasty retreat — to the edge and back again — reflects the push and pull of conflicting desires and impulses that have defined Roth's characters since the beginning. Ozzie, in his youthful, immoderate, defiant escapade, presents a comically exaggerated portrait of the divided self whose conflicting motives and urges cause his intemperate and unrestrained acting-out and hasty retreat. The oversimplification and intentionally unsubtle parody of his protagonists' deep seated ambivalences in the picture of young Ozzie scuttling back and forth on the roof presents a caricature, to be sure, of the divided self and the competing urges that get Roth's characters into all kinds of trouble, "the wrong thing to do, the insane thing to do" (*Exit Ghost* 31). But it also exposes the startling recognition of and confusions about self that motivate such anxious behavior. Ozzie, regarding himself from his perch from on high will ask the question that Roth's protagonists, unhinged, routinely ask: "Is it me? Is it me Me Me Me Me! It has to be me — but is it!" This is the question, Roth assures us, that "a thief must ask himself the night he jimmys open his first window, and it is said to be the question with which bridegrooms quiz themselves before the altar" ("The Conversion" 148). It is the question, that is, that one asks as he rashly, impetuously, steps out of one life and into another in "mythological" pursuit of those "imagined worlds, often green and breastlike, where," as Nathan Zuckerman contends ironically, "we may finally be 'ourselves'" (*The Counterlife* 369).

With such wishful, fantasized pursuit of the pastoral and Brenda Patimkin, Neil Klugman, the driven protagonist in Roth's "Goodbye, Columbus" hightails it out of the claustrophobic, airless streets of Newark, ascending into the lush expanse of possibility in the imagined paradise of Short Hills: "past Irvington and the packed-in tangle of railroad crossings, switchmen shacks, lumberyards, Dairy Queens, and used-car lots ... as though the hundred and eighty feet that the suburbs rose in altitude above Newark brought one closer to heaven ... I was driving past long lawns which seemed to be twirling water on themselves, and past houses where no one sat on stoops ... I drove up and down the

streets whose names were those of eastern colleges, as though the township ... had planned the destinies of the sons of its citizens ... It was as though the map of *The City Streets of Newark* had metamorphosed into crickets, for those mile-long tarry streets did not exist for me any longer" (8-9). Neil Klugman, in a bravado of libidinal energy, abandons life in the stacks of the Newark Library and his Aunt Gladys' kitchen for the hoped-for fantasy of a life in defiance of his upbringing and fortune, a foray into a counterlife, an exchange of existences. So, too, Bucky Cantor, for Roth a half a century later, flees gritty, polio-stricken Newark for the eroticized promise of a girl and fantasy: Marcia Steinberg in the lush, fecund greenery of the Poconos. For Bucky Cantor, the train ride exiting him from Newark and his obligations to his family, his job, and his imperiled playground boys is no less than an exchange of existences: "The train ride, traversing hills and woods and open farmland, made him think of himself as on a far greater excursion" (*Nemesis* 141). Leaving the life bequeathed to him mistakenly behind, "there was an epic dimension" to the journey, "a future new and unknown to him was about to unfold" (140). And, indeed, the unforeseen occurs. Bucky contracts polio and is cast out of paradise. Like Neil Klugman, his predecessor, Bucky Cantor returns to Newark defeated. Ozzie Freedman jumps from the rooftop into the safety of the firefighters' net and the arms of his mother. They all discover the unhappy truth about themselves: that they are imposters, confusing self-misrepresentation for self-invention, extravagant desire for promise, fantasy for reality. From his first published book in 1959 to what would seem to be the last in 2010, Roth constructs characters who forge into unknown, fantasized territory only to retreat, to recoil in fear or disenchantment. For Roth is ever the realist, and finally, there comes a time when instead of "mischievously turning what-was into what-wasn't or what-might-be into what-was — there was only the deadly earnest this-is-it of what-is" (*The Counterlife* 38).

In conclusion, Roth's conflicted characters move into the shadows only to emerge, if momentarily, as someone else, someone other than the character bequeathed to them: Henry Zuckerman escapes to Eretz Yisrael and is reborn as Hanoch in a surge of Zionist zeal in *The Counterlife*; the fearful Eli Peck, slipping into the shadows reemerges wearing the attire of the refugee from the Shoah and becomes "the fanatic"; Nathan Marx, in the dimming light of the Sabbath takes his place among the Jewish personnel; Neil Klugman transcends the tired streets of Newark and his lower-middle-class upbringing for the fruits of suburban Short Hills; and Bucky Cantor, playground director for his neighborhood boys in Jewish Newark in the "tremendous heat of that poisonous summer" of 1944, is reborn as waterfront director in the "harmless clean air of the Pocono Mountains" and the "cold purity" of the lake at Camp Indian Hill (*Nemesis* 267, 157). They all participate in the fantasy of the counterlife, an "identity ... formed by the terrifying power of an imagination richer with reality than your own" (*The Counterlife* 163-64). The notion of a counterlife, a counter-existence, is at very heart of the diasporic history of the Jews. After all, the diaspora, that movable site of contradictions, promises, and second chances, reflects both a running from and a running to, a matter of being pushed out, and advancing into the unknown, imagined worlds until one reaches the promised land, as Zuckerman cautions, "the deep Jewish dream of escaping the danger of insularity and the cruelties of social injustice and persecution ... to reverse the very form of Jewish existence. The construction of a counterlife that is one's own anti-myth ... a manifesto for human transformation as extreme ... as any ever conceived" (*The Counterlife* 166-67).

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