

Jewish History, US-American Fictions, and "Soul-Battering" in Roth's "Conversion of the Jews"

Sandor Goodhart
Purdue University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>

 Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Education Commons](#), [European Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Reading and Language Commons](#), [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#), [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#), [Television Commons](#), and the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: [<clcweb@purdue.edu>](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)

Recommended Citation

Goodhart, Sandor. "Jewish History, US-American Fictions, and "Soul-Battering" in Roth's "Conversion of the Jews"." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 16.2 (2014): [<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2469>](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2469)

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Volume 16 Issue 2 (June 2014) Article 6
Sandor Goodhart,
"Jewish History, US-American Fictions, and 'Soul-Battering'
in Roth's 'Conversion of the Jews'"
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss2/6>>

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 16.2 (2014)**
Thematic Issue ***History, Memory, and the Making of Character in Roth's Fiction***
Ed. Gustavo Sánchez-Canales and Victoria Aarons
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss2/6>>

Abstract: In his article "Jewish History, US-American Fictions, and 'Soul-Battering' in Roth's 'Conversion of the Jews'" Sandor Goodhart discusses Philip Roth's story in which an innocent question raised in a Hebrew school discussion in the early 1950s gets wildly out of control. It leads the student into a screaming fight with his Rabbi, which propels the child into a confrontation with his mother, which in turn leads to a second violent confrontation with the Rabbi (who ends up slapping the child), and the episode culminates in a rooftop exchange over the synagogue where the boy's thought of escape is suddenly converted into the desire to jump (in response to an unruly and increasingly agitated mob below). If the story is finally transformed in Goodhart's view into something else — one of disaster averted rather than disaster enacted — then the process of revealing to its readers the build-up of that transformation from questioning to violence may teach them something about postwar the US-American suburban Jewish community that sustained similar violence abroad (albeit on a vastly amplified scale) and that functions now in this context as a kind of powder keg or time bomb.

Sandor GOODHART

Jewish History, US-American Fictions, and "Soul-Battering" in Roth's "Conversion of the Jews"

There is a Jewish joke that may help us to think about Philip Roth's "Conversion of the Jews" that goes as follows. How can you prove Jesus was Jewish? In three ways, it turns out: he lived at home until he was in his thirties; he went into his father's business; and he thought his mother was a virgin while she thought her son was God. The joke addresses a number of themes relevant to my discussion not the least of which is the general relation of Christianity to Judaism and the specific family setting of Jesus's relation to Judaism. But perhaps most salient is the third, that he thought his mother was a virgin and that she thought her son was God since it invokes the historical/theological debate that Roth's protagonist, Ozzie, has with Rabbi Binder and that causes him so much strife. I will return to this component when I take up the question of humor in the story.

"The Conversion of the Jews" is a story about the good gone wrong. Appearing in *Goodbye Columbus* in 1959, the narrative follows the progress of an innocent question raised in a Hebrew school discussion that gets wildly out of control. It leads a pupil into a screaming fight with his teacher. That fight leads the child in turn into a violent confrontation with his mother (which turns to violence when he informs her about the school room fight). That domestic confrontation leads in its own turn to a second act of violence (this time of the Rabbi against the student at school). And when that incident is exacerbated, it leads, finally, to a rooftop exchange above the synagogue, where, as a result of the child's interaction with his immediate past, and an increasingly agitated and unruly mob, escape is suddenly converted into the desire to jump. And if the story is transformed at the last moment into something else, if it becomes a story of disaster averted (even if only narrowly averted) rather than one of disaster enacted, the process of revealing to the reader the build-up of such disastrous potentials from such innocent beginnings allows Roth to teach us something about the Jewish community that has sustained similar violence from different sources and that functions as a kind of powder keg, a community that may be described — using Elie Wiesel's phrase in the final pages of *The Accident* — as a kind of "time bomb."

The reference to Wiesel's text is not accidental. Published in 1961 two years after Roth's collection in the U.S., *The Accident* may offer us a glimpse, from the vantage point of the Jewish community in France, of the air in which Roth's story was conceived. Here — in Stella Rodway's translation — is a passage from the book's final pages (302-03) on the "time of death": "You claim you love me but you keep suffering," Kathleen says to the nameless narrator in the penultimate chapter, as if he can turn his suffering on and off or as if confessing that he loved this woman (whom he met through friends in New York City after the war) could somehow compensate for the death of his father, his mother, his sister, other family members, and some millions of others in the camps a short while earlier. Her words elicit a powerful and unexpected reply: "She had guessed correctly ... It was true. I was living in the past. Grandmother, with her black shawl on her head, wasn't giving me up." He contrasts a death camp survivor with a lover. "A man who tells a woman ... 'I love you and shall love you forever; may I die if I stop loving you,' believes it." For those who returned from the camps, however, things were different: "With us — those who have known the time of death — it's different. There, we said we would never forget. It still holds true. We cannot forget. The images are there in front of our eyes ... I think if I were able to forget, I would hate myself." Forgetting would be a matter of betrayal — betrayal of those who died there. And yet a conflict is generated: "Our stay there planted time bombs within us. From time to time one of them explodes. And then we are nothing but suffering, shame, and guilt."

The prospect of remembering with all of its difficulties or hating oneself for not doing so as a way of staving off the "time bombs" planted there during the war appears to have been determinative afterwards. "The time of death" insures for its survivors a posthumous existence. Jean Cayrol attempted to describe that existence somewhat earlier in the decade formulating his "oeuvre Lazaréen," his Lazarean novelistic poetics, in which returnees from the deportation camps showed up back in society hardly distinguishable from walking zombies and were greeted generally with disdain or with silence. "The Lazarean hero is never there where we find him ... He is obligated to complete an

immense work of reflection, to *think* incessantly that he is there and not elsewhere; for he has lived within a world not found anywhere and whose frontiers are not marked since they are those of death" (Cayrol 226; emphasis in the original; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine).

The problem in Roth's story is not dissimilar. It is in part generational. The child's elders, like his mother, Rabbi Binder, and the janitor Yaakov Blotnik, are little more than shells of the human beings they were before the war, relics or ghosts of their former selves, and a certain deadness and mustiness pervades them. These individuals have become "fractionated" (to use Roth's word). They see the world in terms of "what's good-for-the-Jews" and "what's not good-for-the-Jews": "For Yakov Blotnik life had fractionated itself simply: things were either good-for-the-Jews or no-good-for-the-Jews" (150). They count an airplane crash a "tragedy" only if it has a certain number of Jewish names attached to it: "Fifty-eight people had been killed in a plane crash at La Guardia. In studying a casualty list in the newspaper his mother had discovered among the list of those dead eight Jewish names [his grandmother had nine but she counted Miller as a Jewish name]; because of the eight she said the plane crash was 'a tragedy'" (142). They consider themselves to be the chosen people as a matter of spiritual entitlement rather than ethical obligation: "Rabbi Binder tried to distinguish for him between political equality and spiritual legitimacy" (141). And they exist (at least in their own minds) to stem the tide of aggression of a Christian foe against them, a foe who would in their view absurdly regard a human being as their God. These folks know little about theology or classic Rabbinic thinking. They certainly do not read scripture with the extraordinary care it demanded of another age — a major concern, we learn from Roth's story, is that the children are taught to read Torah and liturgy for speed rather than understanding — and religious ritual has apparently become equally for them an empty shell game, an obligation to be completed in order to stave off a perceived or imagined disaster. And when disaster does strike — and it appears to strike these days more often internally than externally — they treat it characteristically with outrage and hyperbolic language, with screaming and with rapidly escalating measures of humiliation, "soul-battering," and violence.

From whence does this community originate? Is this condition for Roth the nature of Judaism in the modern world? Not at all. This situation is in fact for Roth in the U.S. as much as it is for his European counterparts the post-Holocaust Jewish community, the community of individuals who shortly before this moment lost all or most of their families, who themselves for no good reason (or even arbitrary reasons) escaped calamity and yet who know (or at least feel) that at any moment they may be subject to the same calamitous destiny as their European counterparts, whose security in short is felt to be as precarious as that of the rooftop fiddlers about whom Sholem Aleichem wrote and from which the popular US-American musical derived.

Into this fold come the unsuspecting children, dutiful children like Ozzie and even Itzie, who take Judaism and its offerings seriously, but who have not had the experience of those adults to deaden them. And so they want to know what is wrong with Christianity, what is wrong with imagining a God who could impregnate a woman without human intervention: a perfectly good Rabbinic thought if we consider God's response to the birth of Isaac: "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" God says at one point to Sarah in Genesis 18:14, when she laughs at the possibility of her getting pregnant, when she, that is to say, like Rabbi Binder, seems caught in the vagaries of historical circumstance rather than remaining open to the wonders of divine possibility. The danger of these childlike positions, these childish versions of Talmudic discussion from the point of view of the elders, is twofold: on the one hand, the posing of such questions cannot but be perceived as a defense of a Christianity that provided the material support and fertile soil (if not the actual ground troops) for the Holocaust. And the second threat perceived in Ozzie's question is that a God who can genuinely do Anything is not only a defense of Christianity, but an attack on Judaism. One has to ask of such a God: where was He at Auschwitz? If God can do Anything, why didn't He help the Jews?

Unbeknownst to him, in other words, Ozzie has walked into a kind of trap. When he tells his mother that Rabbi Binder wants to see her again and informs her that it is because he has argued in class that God can do Anything, she may feel that she is about to be drawn into a theologically oriented discussion for which she is unprepared, which she either rejects as irrelevant to the daily concerns of survival in a mildly anti-Semitic US-America or for which she is simply too emotionally wrought. Thinking in her glassy eyed way about those who were killed in the Holocaust, she can only

perceive Ozzie's question as disrespect for the dead. She enters, kisses her son "quickly on the face" and proceeds to light the Shabbos candles — all business. He on the other hand sees things more imaginatively: "When his mother lit the candles she would move her two arms slowly towards her, dragging them through the air, as though persuading people whose minds were half made up. And her eyes would get glassy with tears ... It had something to do with lighting the candles" (143). In the course of the ceremony, the phone rings and Ozzie muffles the sound feeling in part at least that nothing should be allowed to interrupt her as he watched "his mother dragging whatever she was dragging, and he felt his own eyes get glassy" (143) whatever negative consequence the call might also inaugurate.

Ozzie admires his mother. On the one hand, she was ordinary: "His mother was a round, tired, gray-haired penguin of a woman whose frail skin had begun to feel the tug of gravity and the weight of her own history. Even when she was dressed up she didn't look like a chosen person" (143). In certain settings, however, a sense of the sacred returned: "But when she lit candles she looked like something better; like a woman who knew momentarily that God could do anything" (143). The idea that God can do Anything is linked to this admiration. After the ceremony, he informs her that "she would have to see Rabbi Binder next Wednesday at four-thirty" and then tells her why: "For the first time in their life together she hit Ozzie across the face with her hand" (143). It is as if he is insulting her ancestors. And the next day when Ozzie in frustration insists on his question with Rabbi Binder and says to him "You don't know anything about God" (146), Rabbi Binder does the same thing. He slaps him, as if he is some kind of child nazi who has turned against the God of the Jews, a slap that in this instance draws blood.

It is no small irony, of course, that theological debates current at the time Roth writes this story reflect and support Ozzie's position, that those who think "God died at Auschwitz" might in the eyes of some thinkers know nothing of God themselves, and may have created a God of eternal children to replace a "religion of adults" (demanding human responsibility for human violence) they find too difficult to imagine. Emmanuel Levinas, for example, argues as much in "Loving the Torah More Than God," an essay first heard in a French radio broadcast in 1956: "What is the meaning of this suffering of the innocent? ... Does it not bear witness to a world that is without God, to a land where man alone measures Good and Evil?" ("Aimer" 190). The assumption of atheism is not hard to understand. Moreover, Levinas says, it is undoubtedly "the sanest reaction ... for all those for whom up until a moment ago a God, conceived a bit primitively, distributed prizes, inflicted sanctions, or pardoned faults, and in His kindness treated human beings as eternal children" ("Aimer" 190). But what kind of God is that, he wonders: "with what minor demon, with what strange magician have you populated your sky, you who, today, declare it to be a desert? And why under such an empty sky do you continue to seek a world that is meaningful and good?" ("Aimer" 190). Ozzie, of course, does not have the slightest idea why he has been attacked by his mother or Rabbi Binder for asking questions which seem perfectly good ones and he is thrown into a kind of double bind. He asks his questions out of a dutiful response to Judaism and yet he is attacked for asking the questions he has been encouraged to ask, humiliated for doing what he has been asked to do: "No kidding, Itz," he says in response to this dilemma, "he was trying to make me look stupid" (142), which of course is what the nazis tried to do to the Jews during the Holocaust. The only possible reply, it occurs to him, is to attempt an escape.

The overall situation, in other words, for this Jewish community — as for the fiddler in Sholem Aleichem's stories — is a precarious one in which these Jews who have been humiliated and demoralized turn against their own children for asking questions of them that they have encouraged those children to ask. They repeat upon their own children the traumatizing behavior of which they have been the victim in their own lives. One cannot but feel a profound sympathy for Mrs. Freedman who, in a gesture of candle-lighting, would seem almost to try to summon back the dead from Auschwitz (recall the centuries of Jewish women who, as "hidden Jews," had only this subterranean Sabbath gesture by which to keep alive the traces of the Judaism their ancestors had been forced to renounce). Or for Rabbi Binder who puts his finger on the problem of Christianity from a Jewish perspective, namely, anti-idolatry, that Jesus can never be substituted for Torah or for God and notions taught by Jesus can only be digested within a Jewish consciousness as a way of doing and continuing Judaism, and not a way of breaking away from Judaism. On the other hand and by the

same token, one can only feel sympathy for the children who have not rejected Judaism, but who have endorsed and enacted it out of a very duty to those parents and yet who are punished for that endorsement and that enactment by no less than other Jews. The situation would seem to be at an impasse.

There is an additional irony to this situation. In developing this crisis, in encouraging children to ask these questions and having the adults respond as if they are being attacked not by their own children but by nazis during the Holocaust, Roth allows us to witness a community that ends up reproducing a scapegoating mechanism, a mechanism of sacrificial expulsion that may very well have described the dynamics behind the Jesus of historical record. At the point in the story where the boy on the roof feels the urge to jump, and looks to heaven for a source of guidance as to whether to do it or not, he has become not entirely dissimilar to the historical Jesus who, expelled by his community for trying to teach a renewed appreciation of the prophetic texts, experiences a moment of doubt of his own. Whether teaching prophetic and wisdom literature to the end (in this case from the Psalms) or reflecting a serious fear of betrayal from the God to whom he has turned, the *Eli Eli lama sabachthani* (Matthew 27:46) expresses a similar doubt.

The title of the story would seem to draw our attention to this particular aspect of things. The phrase "the conversion of the Jews" in the context of this story refers literally of course to the four-stage process by which the boy on the roof gets the groups below him to acknowledge his existence as a person: first kneeling, then stating their belief in God and that God can do anything, then stating their belief in Jesus specifically, and then finally promising not to hit on account of God. In this sense, the Jews are "converted" to believing Christians. They say things Jews do not usually say.

But are they in fact converted? Are they changed from a practice in which they were already participating to begin a new one? The phrase has other meanings historically, of course. In the middle ages, for example, writers like Chaucer used the phrase to mean among other things "the end of time," the final event in the spiritual history of the world, a usage that came colloquially to mean in effect "never." This or that will not happen, one was wont to say, until the "conversion of the Jews." Even as late as the seventeenth century, two centuries after the Jews were expelled from England, the reference appears in literary writings. In "To His Coy Mistress," for example, Andrew Marvel wrote: "Had we but world enough, and time, / This coyness, Lady, were no crime. / ... I would / Love you ten years before the Flood, / And you should, if you please, refuse / Till the conversion of the Jews" (lines 1-10; for an account of anti-Semitic stereotypes in Chaucer and other English writers, see, e.g., Corrêa Gabbard).

There is a third rendering. Considering the Latin origin of the word *conversio* and the proximity of its meaning to the Hebrew word *teshuvah* to turn back, to repent, but more fully (in the Maimonidean formula) to abandon the way of sin and return to the way of God, could not the phrase "the conversion of the Jews" also mean the return of those who are in fact Jews, but do not know that they are Jews (or acknowledge that they are Jews) to a state of full disclosure, to a shedding of the mask by which these individuals have concealed from themselves their Jewish origins and the continuing Jewish motor force in their lives — which is to say, could it not refer to the history of Christianity? If at one level the conversion of the Jews that takes place at the end of the story "The Conversion of the Jews" seems to be about their conversion to Christianity, is it not an eminently Jewish return that takes place? They are willing to get down on their knees and give up everything in order to save the life of a child.

Putting aside the designs of the crowd or the interests of the crowd in having Ozzie jump, do not the mother and the Rabbi finally, as removed and as cold and as violent as they have been throughout this short narrative, give up all this behavior in order to save the life of the child, turn against themselves even, deny who they are, and say they believe in Jesus Christ in order that the child be saved? Imagine a Rabbi saying he believes in Jesus Christ! Imagine a mother saying these words who has, just a moment before (if we are reading the story accurately), been saying prayers for the death of her relatives in the Holocaust, an atrocity that may have grown in her mind from the very soil of Christianity. Imagine the same mother and the same Rabbi saying that they will believe in Jesus Christ if their son may be saved, prizing the human above all else, above what their stated beliefs or convictions are, whether those convictions derive from Judaism or from Christianity.

And there is another aspect to the scene. At one point, Ozzie's mother becomes exasperated and undoubtedly frightened. She sees her son on the roof of the synagogue and something clicks for her: "Mrs. Freedman raised her two arms upward as though she were conducting the sky. 'For them he's doing it!' And then in a gesture older than pyramids, older than prophets and floods, her arms came slapping down to her sides. 'A martyr I have. Look!' She tilted her head to the roof. Ozzie was still flapping softly. 'My martyr'" (155).

In a move that recalls her gesture at the candle lighting at the Sabbath table ("When his mother lit the candles she would move her two arms slowly towards her, dragging them through the air, as though persuading people whose minds were half made up" [143]), she lifts her arms. Her words are misunderstood of course ("'Gawhead, Ozz-be a Martin!' It was Itzie. 'Be a Martin, be a Martin', and all the voices joined in singing for Martindom, whatever it was. 'Be a Martin, be a Martin'" [155]). But perhaps Ozzie does not misunderstand them. It is as if he suddenly gets what his mother's Sabbath prayers have been about: "The big net stared up at Ozzie like a sightless eye. The big, clouded sky pushed down. From beneath it looked like a gray corrugated board" (155-56). Are we that far from Wiesel's narrator whose every gesture is monitored by the world of the dead? "Suddenly, looking up into that unsympathetic sky, Ozzie realized all the strangeness of what these people, his friends, were asking" (156). Which is what? Namely, that "they wanted him to jump, to kill himself; they were singing about it now — it made them that happy." And one thing above all struck him as "an even greater strangeness:" that "Rabbi Binder was on his knees, trembling. If there was a question to be asked now it was not "Is it me?" but rather "Is it us?: Is it us?" (156). Being on the roof, it turned out, was a serious thing.

Like the narrator at the conclusion of Wiesel's *The Accident* looking up at the sky in this topsy turvy universe, and addressing the dead, Ozzie realizes that it is not about him, about his individual fate — however strange it is to be up here on the roof, able to exert such curious powers over people, as result of simply a threat to jump off — but rather it is about us, about the Jews. After the speech that the narrator of Wiesel's book delivers (and which we cited above), he acknowledges the emptiness, the utter futility, of any assertion of any love he could offer Kathleen: "With us — those who have known the time of death — it's different," he theorized. The survivor of the camps "poisons the air." He is the "incarnation of time that negates the present and the future, only recognizing the harsh law of memory" (*The Accident* 304). "To change, we would have to change the past. But the past is beyond our power. Its structure is solid, immutable. The past is Grandmother's shawl, as black as the cloud above the cemetery." In that context forgetting is out of the question: "Forget the cloud? The black cloud which is Grandmother, her son, my mother. What a stupid time we live in! Everything is upside down. The cemeteries are up above, hanging from the sky, instead of being dug in the moist earth ... Everything has taken refuge above. And what emptiness here below! Real life is there. Here, we have nothing" (*The Accident* 305).

It is hard to miss in this context of course the connection to the "cemeteries hanging from the sky." Not unlike Wiesel's narrator, not unlike his mother at the Sabbath table or imagining the imminent death of her son — one more in a long line of deaths she has recently experienced — Ozzie is in effect conducting the universe. "Being on the roof, it turned out, was a serious thing" (156). And as a result, everything changes. He asks his mother to kneel: "Mamma, get down on your knees, like Rabbi Binder" and he couples it with a threat. "Or I'll jump" (156). She kneels and as if emboldened by his success, he asks everybody to do the same: "'Everybody kneel.' There was the sound of everybody kneeling" (157). Even Blotnik is forced to kneel: "Ozzie could hear Rabbi Binder saying in a gruff whisper, 'or he'll kill himself,' and when next he looked there was Yakov Blotnik off the doorknob and for the first time in his life upon his knees in the Gentile posture of prayer" (156). Even the firemen kneel: "As for the firemen — it was not as difficult as one might imagine to hold a net taut while you are kneeling" (157). And then he changes tactics: "'Rabbi Binder, do you believe in God?' / 'Yes.' / 'Do you believe God can do anything?' Ozzie leaned his head out into the darkness. 'Anything?'" (157). The Rabbi hesitates and so Ozzie instructs him: "Tell me you believe God can do Anything." After a second delay, the Rabbi complies and then he reveals his coup de grace: "Tell me you believe God can make a child without intercourse" (157). And the Rabbi responds accordingly: "God," Rabbi Binder admitted, "Can make a child without intercourse" and his Mother says "God can

make a child without intercourse" (157). And of course Blotnik: "In a few moments Ozzie heard an old comical voice say something to the increasing darkness about God. Next, Ozzie made everybody say it. And then he made them all say they believed in Jesus Christ — first one at a time, then all together" (158). They all do it: his mother, the Rabbi, Yaakov Blotnik, his friends, the gathered crowd, even the firemen. They get down on their knees and pray like Christians. The entire community has come through for him.

But he has one more request. "[W]hen the catechizing was through" and "it was the beginning of evening" he reveals what he been on his mind throughout. "Mamma, don't you see — you shouldn't hit me. He shouldn't hit me. You shouldn't hit me about God, Mamma. You should never hit anybody about God." His Mother avoids the direct confrontation: "Ozzie, please come down now." But Ozzie returns: "Promise me, promise me you'll never hit anybody about God." And everybody echoes his concern. "He had asked only his mother, but for some reason everyone kneeling in the street promised he would never hit anybody about God." And in that case he can resume his place among them: "I can come down now, Mamma," the boy on the roof finally says. He turns his head both ways as though checking the traffic lights: "Now I can come down." And of course he does: "And he did, right into the center of the yellow net that glowed in the evening's edge like an overgrown halo" (158).

At the heart of it all for the "boy on the roof," in other words, is humiliation: "Mamma, don't you see — you shouldn't hit me. He shouldn't hit me. You shouldn't hit me about God, Mamma. You should never hit anybody about God" (158). The message is simple. He is calling them to task for doing to others — for doing to him — what was done to them. Whatever was done to them in the Holocaust, however bad it was — and it was as bad as it could possibly be — they should not repeat that behavior on their children.

And is that not finally Judaism? Judaism, Levinas says, is not a religion, if what we mean by that word is a set of beliefs and practices, but a mode of being, one that prizes above all the adventure of the human. "Teach me the Torah while I stand on one foot," the novice asks of Hillel in the famous Talmudic midrash, as he had asked previously of Shammai, the more traditional Rabbinic teacher who had in fact turned him away at the door. But Hillel does not turn him away. Okay, his reply in effect says. Here it is. "What you don't like done to you by others, don't do to me. That is the whole of Torah. Now go and learn it." Torah is about the emergence of the human from religious thinking, a religious thinking defined by a relation to the sacred that is inevitably a relation to violence and exclusionary behavior, and a human that is defined as the assumption of infinite responsibility for the other individual, above all and prior to my responsibility to myself. It is a Judaism in other words that must be conceived as a "heteronomy," therefore, rather than an "autonomy," a "hetero-nomos" rather than an "auto-nomos," an "other-naming" rather than a "self-naming," a founding of my subjectivity on the priority of the other rather than the priority of the self (for an account of these ideas in philosophy, see Levinas, *Otherwise*). If Roth's story leaves us with a positive feeling at its conclusion, it is not finally that the child has turned the tables in vengeful reversal against his elders, forced them to listen to him as a person, or even gotten them to affirm the possibilities of his own belief, or perform some ritual stunts that have no more meaning for him than they do for them, but rather that they are willing to sacrifice all for him: the Rabbi, the mother, even his friend Itzy.

Does the fact that in the final moment of the story he appears to jump rather than come back down through the stairs alter this understanding? What if in their praying, in the fervor of their affirmation of their belief in Jesus Christ the firemen happen to drop the net just at the moment that he jumps, and what if when he leaps "right into the center of the yellow net" that net "glowed in the evening's edge like an overgrown halo" for other reasons than the happy ending we would like to imagine? In other words, what if, perhaps in his childish enthusiasm, Ozzie does finally take the plunge they have been urging him to take (or that a moment ago they were urging him to take). Perhaps acting on a whim, perhaps heady from his apparent success at changing their minds, and like the thief that Roth describes, he "scoots out the window" (148) or "signs the hotel register for two" (148) so to speak?

The story would seem finally to be less interested in the particularity of the child's fate than in their final humanity, their capacity to let go of whatever stated convictions or beliefs they held and to

enact their deepest impulses which is their humanity towards the child. But the very fact that we can raise this possibility, or that we can follow Roth in raising it (for the ending of Roth's story remains mysterious in some regards: he could have taken the stairs), returns us to the question of humor with which we began and which in conclusion we must now address. For Roth is also, after all is said and done and especially perhaps in these early stories, a comic writer. It is hard to imagine *The Plot against America* or *The Dying Animal* or *The Human Stain* in these terms. What is the function of humor in this story?

The first matter we have to acknowledge is that this story is not the most humorous of Roth's tales. The history of a child who asks his elders about the capacities of God and who receives for his inquiries a verbal battering by his teacher, a slap in the face by his mother, a second blow to the face by his Rabbi, one that drives him to the roof of the synagogue in a potentially suicidal frenzy — such a history is not likely to send us from the room howling in peals of laughter. *Portnoy's Complaint* is a considerably more fully developed and sustained comic fabric. Who after reading Roth's first full-length novel will ever again eat liver in the same fashion?

On the other hand, the story is not without a comic strain of its own. While we no longer have Aristotle's treatise on comedy (as we do his treatise on the nature and function of tragic writing), a number of scholars have argued about the nature of comic expectations (see, e.g., Girard; Frye; Sypfer). One of the key ideas to emerge from this discussion is that the comic is to be distinguished from the tragic on the basis of distance. Tragedy presents a subject matter from a certain proximity which allows us to feel the pain and anguish of the experiences of the characters, while comedy offers us similar (or sometimes even identical) subject matter from a distance at which the cost of these experiences to the individuals undergoing them is less apparent.

Take, for example, the scene with the mother lighting the *shabbos* candles. If we view it with a little more distance than we developed it above, it verges on the comical: "When his mother lit the candles she would move her two arms slowly towards her, dragging them through the air, as though persuading people whose minds were half made up" (143). Subtracting for a moment the possible serious contexts from the gesture — religious solemnity, world-wide Jewish communication, or a memory of past atrocity, for example — the gesture appears vaguely comedic as if she were playing a parlor game of some kind charades. Viewed from the perspective of the child who lacks all these historical references, the gestures can only appear devoid of serious intent. Or take, perhaps even more poignantly, the moment at which his mother arrives to find Ozzie threatening to jump from the synagogue roof and Rabbi Binder informs her that he cannot stop him, that "he's doing it for them." Here is another moment that we read above more seriously that could be read more comically: "Mrs. Freedman raised her two arms upward as though she were conducting the sky. "For them he's doing it!" (155).

The self-dramatizing "Jewish" quality of the humor does not detract from the distance we experience even if it does allow more pain to be registered than its non-Jewish counterparts (pratfalls such as slipping on a banana peel do not allow much registry of pain). But there is a second way in which Roth uses comedy, in a way that relates to the joke I started my analysis with: the joke asked how you can prove that Jesus was Jewish and answered that there are three ways: that he lived at home until he was in his thirties, that he went into his father's business, that he thought his mother was a virgin, and that she thought her son was God. The joke establishes at the outset as a premise its own conclusion. The Jewish perspective declares to its Christian counterparts that the stories you tell about your "God" — about his extended childhood, about his tribalism, about his perceptions (or misperceptions) of his mother (and her perceptions or misperceptions of him) — render him Christian. But in fact we tell the same stories about our children. These qualities are precisely the qualities which make him most Jewish and most child-like. The stories are neither historical nor theological, but midrashic, witnesses to a gap in scripture that point us not to the historical realities we have not investigated sufficiently nor to the divine possibilities we have not examined, but to more informed scriptural exegesis, to a more inclusive interpretative reading, one that is enacted in one fashion or another in the very telling of them.

The key to Roth's "Conversion of the Jews," in other words, may be to recognize that after all the skewed communications — Itzy hearing only sexual references in Ozzie's account of his encounter with

Rabbi Binder, Ozzie hearing only theological possibility in Rabbi Binder's description of God, Rabbi Binder hearing only a defense of the religious movement that contributed to the murder of his family and an assault upon common Jewish explanations for that calamity, Mrs. Freedman hearing only disrespect for her memories and other skewed communications — the acts of conversion in which they all identically participate render them not less Jewish than before but more so. Turning against their own familiar religious practice in a time of crisis when a human life is at stake, endorsing in an unqualified and unmitigated way the "boy on the roof" (as Rabbi Binder and Mrs. Freedman do) — a boy who has fiddled with the fragile if common understanding of things — is the practice of anti-idolatry itself. It is a practice that turns out to be the secret heart and soul not only of Judaism but also of Christianity, a Christianity that has at times forgotten that it is Jewish (and would do well to remember that affiliation), no less than a Judaism that has forgotten that above all it constituted itself an advocacy for the human and a secret that understands that God is Jewish and historical and human and capable, in His infinite wisdom and power and mercy of absolutely Anything.

Works Cited

- Aleichem, Sholem. *Teveye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories*. Trans. Hillel Halkin. New York: Schocken Books, 1987.
- Cayrol, Jean. *Lazare parmi nous*. Paris: Seuil, 1950.
- Corrêa Gabbard, Alexandra Lauren. *The Demonization of the Jew in Chaucer's "The Prioress's Tale," Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice and Scott's Ivanhoe*. Ph.D. Diss. Belo Horizonte: Federal U of Minas Gerais, 2011.
- Frye, Northrop. *The Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1966.
- Fergusson, Margaret, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy, eds. *Norton Anthology of Poetry*. New York: Norton, 2004.
- Girard, René. *To Double Business Bound: Essays on Literature, Mimesis, and Anthropology*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1978.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. "Aimer la Thora plus que Dieu." *Difficile liberté. Essais sur le judaïsme*. By Emmanuel Levinas. Paris: Albin Michel, 1983. 189-190.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1998.
- Marvel, Andrew. "To His Coy Mistress." *Norton Anthology of Poetry*. Ed. Margaret Fergusson, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy. New York: Norton, 2005. 478-79.
- Roth, Philip. *Portnoy's Complaint*. New York: Random House, 1969.
- Roth, Philip. "The Conversion of the Jews." *Goodbye, Columbus: And Five Other Stories*. By Phillip Roth. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1959. 137-58.
- Roth, Philip. *The Dying Animal*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001.
- Roth, Philip. *The Human Stain*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000.
- Roth, Philip. *The Plot against America*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004.
- Sypher, Wylie. *Comedy*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1980.
- Wiesel, Elie. *The Accident*. Trans. Stella Rodway. New York: Hill and Wang, 1962.
- Wiesel, Elie. *The Night Trilogy*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1999.

Author's profile: Sandor Goodhart teaches English-language literatures and Jewish Studies at Purdue University where he served as director of the Jewish Studies Program, the Philosophy and Literature Program, and the Classical Studies Program. In addition to numerous articles, Goodhart's book publications include *Sacrificing Commentary: Reading the End of Literature* (1996), *The Prophetic Law: Essays in Judaism, Girardianism, Literary Studies, and the Ethical* (2014), and the edited volume *Sacrifice, Scripture, and Substitution: Readings in Ancient Judaism and Christianity* (with Ann Astell, 2011). E-mail: <goodhart@purdue.edu>