Everything Like a Novel: Reality and Self in The Fiction of Philip Roth and C. K. Stead

Jordan Margetts

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English, The University of Auckland, 2021.

Abstract

The problem of attempting to represent reality in full inevitably includes the problem of representing writerly, or literary, reality. The variegated aspects of constructing a life – memory, relationships, perspective, the forming of coherent stories – are all equally literary problems which face authors trying to draft and structure fiction.

This thesis interprets Philip Roth and C. K Stead as writers concerned with the problem of representing the real in as many shades and layers as possible and who therefore invariably utilise postmodern and metafictional methods of storytelling. And yet their goal and focus as novelists is the detailing and evoking of the real – the specifics of life in the world, which problematically include art and storytelling.

Acknowledgements

Like so many others in the last year I found myself unexpectedly in overseas lockdowns. This is not an ideal situation for criticism – novelists may enjoy lonely Connecticut farmhouses, but criticism is really all about conversation. About the pub, the café, the restaurant and the bar, the supervisor's office, the lecture hall. Accordingly, when you're stuck without all of these things as well as the physical proximity of your friends, the people in your life become the stars by which you navigate. The only way to keep sane.

With this in mind I'm profoundly grateful first to Alex Calder, my supervisor, who has been unfailingly patient and helpful, and most important of all is a superb and careful reader. An inspiration. I was lucky to have Alex, even if I missed out on in-person catch-ups. (I'm sorry for being so slow.)

Otherwise, I would like to thank my crew of formal and informal correspondents. Conrad Grimshaw, Aditya Vasudevan, and Christopher Smol have all variously read, conversed, and put-up with what is now an unspeakably long period of thesis-work and multiple histrionic fits. Always bright and brilliant and more importantly always funny.

Amindha Fernando, my best friend and the best man I know, who has helped in almost every way, not least in all the virtual pub sessions, an indispensable lifeline.

And finally, my darling wife, who reads everything I ever write and who never admits when it's bad, Ana Margetts. I love you**.**

Introduction – Bearing Witness

…and everything like a novel
has a beginning and a middle and an

end except that novels like
life go on repeating themselves
– C. K Stead, 'A Warm Wind From The East'[1]

How should the artist bear witness to life? This thesis is a study in the ways two novelists from the same generation, though separated by vast oceans and cultures, have dealt with the subtly chaotic truth Stead expresses in his poem. Life is like a novel, and novels are like life. If this sounds like a kind of oxymoron, one need only look closer: the novel at some level relies on life, if not for straightforward mimetic representation, then for the raw material upon which story is built, for the facts, the data that, beaten into new shapes, becomes fiction. The ways in which life is already like art have been expressed in various forms, not least when melancholy Jaques said 'all the world's a stage', and it is no coincidence that those words were written by a playwright. A truth of reading and writing is not only that life feeds art, but art becomes the window through which one reads the world; the experience of being in the world is an involuted one, where novels and life keep reading one-another backwards and forwards, forever. In a

[1] C. K. Stead. *Collected Poems: 1951-2006* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2006), 182.

world where novels are part of life, describing reality is a strange, self-conscious and shattered act.

C. K Stead and Philip Roth are not similar novelists. Stead is a poet, academic, and critic, as well as a novelist. And while Roth has flirted with the essay, and began his career in the literary New York of the 1950s writing short fiction, once he began writing novels he never again published a new story. Their styles too are radically different – Philip Roth's voice developed along now famous lines, sharp vocal stylings capable of great and savage eloquence. A born ranter, a novelist in possession of fantastically essayistic gifts. Stead's novels are quiet and witty, chiefly concerned with variations and changes to adult lives, marriages and affairs going well or badly, travel, and especially nature. Stead's sentences are plain as clear glass even when his narrators are not. The language is simple, effects build through accretion, not the verbose thrust of a Rothian speech.

The two novelists however reflect dazzlingly off of one another. Each is centrally concerned, in the novels I address, with the life and perceptions specifically of the writer; how it is that the artist perceives and builds reality. Both are novelists who might be called 'postmodernists' in these stories, whose total publication history spans just shy of twenty years. They utilise self-aware narrators, fragmented and non-linear narrative, and surprisingly regular *mise en abyme* – the usual bag of tricks. And yet my argument is that the two approach these techniques from, as it were, the other side. Not from a conviction

that fiction is inadequate to life, or that fiction is somehow dishonest and must be forced like the emperor to see that it has no clothes. Rather from a conviction that fiction must represent as much as possible of reality – a reality which is messy, a reality which is in constant flux, buffeted by the waves of memory and history, of interpretation and coercion, of wish-thinking and cynicism. My contention is that each lights up the other precisely because they are such different writers – in style, in background – who are intensely determined to bear witness to a reality far more complicated than realism. On his eightieth birthday, Philip Roth gave a speech in which he summed the novelist's passion:

> ...this passion for specificity, for the hypnotic materiality of the world one is in, is all but at the heart of the task to which every American novelist has been enjoined since Herman Melville and his whale and Mark Twain and his river: to discover the most arresting, evocative verbal description for every last American thing. Without strong representation of the thing—animate or inanimate—without the crucial representation of what is real, there is nothing. Its concreteness, its unabashed focus on all the mundanities, a fervor for the singular and a profound aversion to generalities is fiction's lifeblood. It is from a scrupulous fidelity to the blizzard of specific data that is a personal life, it is from the force of its uncompromising particularity, from its *physicalness*, that the realistic novel, the insatiable realistic novel, with its multitude of realities, derives its ruthless intimacy. And its mission: to portray humanity in its particularity.[2]

And, to illustrate the difference, Stead in the second volume of his autobiography describes his mounting conviction about the reality of the external world, its glory, on a trip to France:

[2] Philip Roth. *Philip Roth at 80: A Celebration*, (New York: Library of America, 2014), 48.

> The day in Paris was cold, there was ice on the puddles and clouds in the sky, and one of my great travel moments, the kind that stays with you forever, was waking in our compartment (a couchette this time, fold-down beds, rather than the flash wagon lit of the previous night) to the sight of the blue of the Mediterranean, the yellow walls and orange roofs of its houses, the scarlet and purple bougainvillea and yellow mimosa, the hill-slopes of vines and olives and citrus – those classical landscapes which seemed, and can still seem (and perhaps not only to the Eurocentric mind) the real centre of the civilised world. It was Dr Johnson's stone again. Beauty existed; it was not just an idea, or a subjective and personal preference, but a human fact, an aspect of "reality". What I was seeing at that moment was beautiful.[3]

These are as close, I think, to statements of intent that either novelist has given. And in their modes of delivery we see how different are their styles, their approaches. Roth's speech reads here part essay, part rant, the incantatory repetition of near-synonyms: specificity, mundanities, particularity, and then the beat of the drum, the old man repeats 'specificity'. Stead wraps his observation tightly, unspooled like thread with rich description, see how the details build for themselves, he does not twiddle the adjectives and elongate the clauses. The list appears to have its own power, and the power lies in statements of the striking and simple: blue, yellow, orange, scarlet, purple, yellow again. You feel the train rush, then he chooses doubled-nouns which are both colours and objects: 'olives', 'citrus'. The train goes by, the colours of Europe flash on, and Stead makes his case – that beauty exists as fact, as objective reality.

[3] C.K. Stead. *You Have A Lot to Lose* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2020), 232.

I have organised the chapters as a tryptic, each pairing a Roth novel with a Stead novel, and examining them in the light of their representational and structural concerns. Firstly, *All Visitors Ashore* and *The Ghost Writer,* and how each approaches representing, or rather structuring and re-structuring memory. Each looks back at creative youth and builds a layered verbal object from the fragments of the past. In the case of *The Ghost Writer,* a movement in four parts, and an explosion from a central point, an imaginary interaction with Anne Frank;[4] whereas *All Visitors Ashore* loops and lopes around a series of summer misadventures in warm sunny Takapuna Beach, building and spinning.[5] These short and melancholy memory novels set out complex methods of mapping and building the past; they employ a degree of post-modern technique but are restrained in their telling, comprehensible in their organisation.

The second chapter reads two novels which in some ways do not cohere – where narratives fire off in various directions and challenge a readerly expectation for structural *finish*. *The Counterlife* is a stunningly complex novel built around shuffled parts, new realities emerging and confronting one another, picked up and worked out in realist detail before being undermined by the next.[6] *The End of the Century at The End of the World* is a novel of collage, a modernist novel that cycles

[4] Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer,* (New York: Vintage, 1975).

[5] C. K. Stead, *All Visitors Ashore*, (London: Random House, 1984).

[6] Philip Roth, *The Counterlife*, (London: Vintage, 1986).

back in on itself, or appears to – though not with the nostalgic glow of *All Visitors Ashore*, a rather sadder, more middle aged novel, and a more complicated one.[7]

Finally, the shorter third chapter focuses on what I call 'scandal novels', novels where the concerns about telling stories intersect not with the writerly life, but with other lives. In this case, professors who have moral or at least political conflicts with students – who face scandal. Rather than outlining their structural systems as I do in the first two chapters, I focus specifically on the scandal and how it is narrated, how it is dealt with. The two books are opposite sides of a kind of fantasist's coin. *The Human Stain* is a tragedy, which takes scandal as its starting place and cascades through ruination and attempted renewal to death.[8] *The Death of The Body* is a lighter work, where a metafictional and ambiguous narrator crafts the story of a professor having an affair with a student, and the potential marital and professional crisis that looms just above the horizon.[9] I think it important to have a chapter analysing what we might call problem novels, novels that do not sit well with contemporary sensibilities – uncomfortable books. Even in these almost reactionary novels the commitment to realism, the confusion and difficulty of witness and record and representation remains the animating force.

---

[7] C. K Stead, *The End of The Century At The End of The World,* (Auckland: Harper Collins, 1992).

[8] Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (London: Vintage, 2000).

[9] C. K. Stead, *The Death of The Body* (London: Harper Collins, 1986).

Certain patterns work themselves out across the novels, reforming new scenarios from the same set of core senses. The use of the transferential, symbolic female as a kind of vector for the themes of the novel is near-omnipresent – Amy, Pat, Maria, Faunia, Delphine, Claire, Louise. And of course, sex. Roth and Stead, though too old to be a part of the baby-boom generation, lived through the sexual revolution, and lived on through the reactions to it. The literature of their generation is excited by sex both as technical challenge, a new arena for the novelist to enter, and as a celebrated reality. Much like the accuser-focussed narratives in *The Human Stain* and *The Death of The Body*, obsessive recapitulations of sexual adventures age strangely; and yet here too the artist insists on a kind of realism. Philip Roth's protagonists over the novels (all are Zuckerman novels) move from youthful good health and sexual exuberance to 'impotence and incontinence', male sexuality is shown up as a kind of psychopathology, an obsession, but a real and inevitable one. Stead, in line with his celebratory ethic writes similar scenes across his books, sultry women and sexually charismatic intellectuals, enthused love-making, affairs.

None of this is to suggest that the two novelists are twinning or working on the same ideas in some technical way, they definitively are not. But their approaches to realism, and their mix of intellectualism, hedonism, and careful craft all come together to shed light on one-another. A central problem that defines each of their careers is this

determination to show truth, or reality, through art. An impulse and a problem which leads Roth head-first in the direction of the execrable, the pathological, the neurotic and strange, and leads Stead to worship and enshrine, to coddle and codify more and more of life as simply beautiful. The value in analysing them together is in observing these different but passionate evocations of the real work themselves out through the technical problems of representation – of memory, of incoherence and scatter, of scandal and doubt. Which is to say, life:

> At death, you break up: the bits that were you
> Start speeding away from each other forever
> With no one to see. It's only oblivion, true:
> We had it before, but then it was going to end,
> And was all the time merging with a unique endeavour
> To bring to bloom the million-petalled flower
> Of being here…[10]

What Roth and Stead try to do is press the million-petalled flower, hoping that dried into the life-like unreality of art, we might see its colours more and closer while we can.

[10] Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), 131.

Chapter One
Coherence and Re/Construction: *The Ghost Writer* and *All Visitors Ashore*

'Now I am quietly waiting for
the catastrophe of my personality
to seem beautiful again,
and interesting, and modern'
-Frank O'Hara, *Mayakovsky*[11]

In memory we become our own doppelgangers. And we stare at our earlier incarnations with the fascination of a child looking in a mirror: *me but not me*. Turn your head left and the man in the mirror – who is you and not you – turns his to the right. Memory is the looking glass. The primary thread linking *All Visitors Ashore* and *The Ghost Writer* is a sense of this doubled, slightly off, comic and spooky and surreal selfhood that develops in a fictional re/construction. I divide the word intentionally because a fictional remembrance is not a memoir – though the memoir of course is a kind of fiction too. The fictional recreation of a fictional past is a kind of dynamo: it remakes itself while making

[11] Frank O'Hara, 'Mayakovsky,' in *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara,* ed. Donald M. Allen (Oakland: University of California Press, 1995).

itself. The middle aged and established writer, the calmer voice, looks back on a younger self and the possibility of *really being there* seems to evaporate: who is this Young Turk, with eager hopes and lofty ambitions and post-adolescent bumbling? How did he then become me now? If these questions are taken to be a central part of the architecture of each novel then we see too where the two divide: the story, enshrined, the making of the story, exposed – the past self, transformed into character. *The Ghost Writer* does not so much parody or postmodernise the bildungsroman as explode it – show it up for so much frippery and falsehood – the core of the novel is no core at all. It is concerned with what Mailer calls 'the spooky art'[12] of turning the building blocks of mere experience into art, into fiction. *All Visitors Ashore* is a different kind of beast, though metafictionally aware and similarly sceptical of its grandfather form, Stead's novel plays hopscotch with New Zealand's recent literary history: is this a novel set against the parochialism of the country, or against the parochialism of New Zealand's so-called 'literary nationalist' epoch? Is it, as we are told over and again by hapless critics, a *roman-a-clef*? And of course these questions oversimplify: Curl Skidmore with his twisting monikers and sonic resemblance to the author is established through a kind of poetic pulverisation, his older self spinning a nostalgic Auckland past – all that beach, all that sex – though refusing to ignore the real, the political world of strikes and cold war panic, all the while intruding into the literary a near constant catalogue of unanswered questions and mild accusations. The older Skidmore looking back remains flummoxed and appreciative, he sees the younger self in the mirror, and tries to draw circles around him, figure out the *why* that never comes. What these novels begin to do, then, is represent both Roth and Stead in (need it be said) very different ways finding themselves entering 'mazes and

[12] Norman Mailer, *The Spooky Art: Some Thoughts on Writing* (New York: Random House, 2003).

penetrating the vortex of spirals'[13], that place which comes to resemble not the strictly *real* and causally straightforward universe, comforting linearity, but a representation of how the self really operates: doubles and dupes, false-names and false-starts, pasts that are manipulated or made-up; the stuff fiction is made on.

The thread I want to tie between these two novels is primarily this question of past selves and their narration. But more particularly the construction of a fictional writerly self in the past. In a sense, the anxiety present in these novels of creative starts written during authors' and narrators' creative middles is not so much an 'anxiety of influence' in the Bloomian sense, though that's there too, especially in Roth, but what might be called an anxiety of self. By which I mean: if Bloom's sense of the 'Anxiety of Influence' is that artists (or 'strong' artists, as he'd have it) do not merely absorb influence but rather wrestle in a kind of Freudian dialectic with their forebears, then in these novels the wrestling – though not, as Bloom would have it, unto death – becomes a kind of dialectic with a past self. The complexity here, though, is that the past-self, young Skidmore, young Zuckerman, is invented on the page, the wrestling is contemporaneous with the creation of a self.[14] The artist wants to know how it all started, or really how it all got going. The balance then is between arbitrariness – this particular moment, this snowy house, this beach-side flat – of event, and significance of writing.

And hence what each does is dramatize, or limn, the negotiations between the self at the moment of narration and the self in the narrative past. Which is to say that the process of selection, taking the arbitrary and giving it shifting significance in the text becomes the

[13] Cynthia Ozick uses this striking image to describe certain psychic qualities undergirding modernist writing, in particular to link the late Henry James to the work of Kafka. Cynthia Ozick, 'What Henry James Knew', in *Letters of Intent (*London: Atlantic Books, 2017), 5.

[14] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 5.

drama itself. That process by which the construction happens, that process by which the texts themselves seem desperate to cohere around a point but find those points lacking – empty centres. In this way, memory novels like these, are not only the wayward children of the *Bildungsroman*, but the bastard children of Freudian psychoanalysis – with its attempts to gather, between analyst and analysand, the shards of mere memory, the fragments of experience and build them into a narrative; a coherent explanation for the reality of a past that is in fact gone, washed away. Take Peter Brooks's definition, via Freud, of 'transference':

> …the transference is the realm of the 'as-if', one in which the history of the past, its *dramatis personae* and emotional conflicts, becomes invested in a special kind of present, one that favors representation and symbolic replay of the past, and that should lend itself to its eventual revision through the listener's "interventions."[15]

Of course this is not the whole story: in fiction unlike therapy neither the teller at present nor the events and persons of the past are strictly 'real', there is no actual past out there to excavate or investigate. Yet this notion of 'transference', some zone where the past might be played in the so-called 'as-if' (this auto-fiction) in experimental attempts to form narrative is precisely what is going on in both *The Ghost Writer* and *All Visitors Ashore*. The distinction being that there is no therapeutic goal to be reached, no life to bring into coherent order for the purpose of social function or emotional well-being; there is no objective analyst aiding the attempts; the stakes are the non-utilitarian goals of art. Narrative texts do not 'have' to cohere, but coherence is an expectation nonetheless, so the process of re-making while making is also the process of making into art the actual process – that is, the artist's process of selection, structure, pattern, and demarcation – of

[15] Peter Brooks, *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 53.

devising literary art in the very first place. A kind of realist metafiction, then, wherein not only the 'reality' of fiction qua fiction is acknowledged, but also the reality of construction as a kind of fiction, which is to say made up in the often frantic search for coherence and causation. And fundamentally what then links the two is showing this adventure in and of itself, in Roth's case through a complicated hypothetical technique, and in Stead's through the lyrical mixing of past and present, question and answer, in a way that begins to mimic a sort of auto-analysis very closely.[16] Perhaps another way to put this is simply that there is no distinction between action and reflection on the analyst's couch: the action is reflection.

Reading *The Ghost Writer* I always have a sense of floors dropping out from under the text and, somewhat paradoxically, contexts expanding outwards. The book is extremely short, and there's a kind of hollow in the middle: not a Kafkaesque one (though tellingly Roth kept a photograph of Kafka above his writing desk in Connecticut), not a screaming existential void, but a kind of hollowness of literary material. Here it all sits, he seems to say, look at my 'stuff', look where it comes from. Do you really see anything? And the reader does and does not: the book circles around what seems to be the central observation that literary impulses, that a voice, starts in the boots and gets all the way to the head, or the pen. The making of literature, the crafting of narrative, is sensibility imposed on raw, or even in some fundamental way irrelevant, material – often against the individual's will. The matter of art, in *The Ghost Writer*, is imposed by the psyche, upon which in turn society and history impose themselves. So the

[16] Note: Stead himself would undoubtedly balk at the suggestion that his novel is in any way 'about' psychoanalysis, and of course I am not suggesting that it is, but merely the process as outlined – these attempts at cohering the self through narrative then transported into a doubly fictive world parallel many of these impulses to different ends.

structure of the book becomes a kind of regression dramatised as novel: the apparent bildungsroman shatters, it becomes a made-up construct – in effect, nothing happens. The idea of mentorship and 'influence', too, become muddied – all these fake fathers selected to replace a real one, internal compromises (if not Zuckerman *père*, then Abravanel, if not Abravanel, then Lonoff). And upon all of this is the looming reality of history: it sits on Zuckerman's little shoulders on the pull-out couch and the simple setting of the writer's home is also a vector for the great Jewish tragedy (*the* great tragedy) of the twentieth century: the holocaust. The slightness of the book and the grandeur of its themes – how art is made, how history makes it – become an illustration of how the selfhood of the artist sits in hysterical tension with almost infinite layers of context and subtext, and the older voice, the voice telling the story, sets about creating if not order then at least shape from all this mess.

The tenses in *All Visitors Ashore* shift around, but primarily the book is written through the immediacy of the present-tense, and the odd effect is that it both creates a forward momentum as well as a kind of nostalgic glow. The book becomes a whirlwind of scenes on the edge: the edge of the artist's life, the edge of Auckland, the edge of the world – always looking out at Rangitoto and beyond, to the sea, to 'overseas'. This is a novel of paths diverging, small moments, little decisions that build up a self, and the artist who (we eventually see) is turning over all these little instances and questioning himself: *Why this? Was this moment important? How did it feel?* Questions like these all operate with a view to the political realities of Stead's novels – in one sense *All Visitors Ashore* operates in a kind of modernist dreamscape of memory and emotional fluctuation, but it also wraps itself around the Waterfront Strikes, the cold war environs of fifties Auckland. And so again we see the self as it develops not in spite of, but in askance relationship to, the times. Towards the end of the novel the narrator spins into this sort of

macro-perspective – all in the context of the illegal abortion Curl and Pat organise. That blunt kitchen instrument, that concrete detail that transforms a legal problem into a personal one, both gross and inane, 'the juice extractor':

> History is always written as if the doings of ordinary nameless faceless persons such as the young unmarried couple looking for a juice extractor were a grey and ill-defined background to the stage on which politicians strut and strike attitudes and make decisions and laws, but of course history is not reality, it is merely fiction badly written, and in reality it is another way about, the politicians are the grey background to ordinary lives, however their strutting and posturing and decision – and law-making may bear upon the availability of juice extractors.[17]

This idea of the proles, the little men and women who play out the drama of history, being the *real* story chimes with the historiography that would rush through the university a decade later than the novel is set, and for two decades before it was written; the history of working peoples, the history of the 'everyman', E.P Thomson's famous mission to 'rescue the [common person] from the enormous condescension of posterity.'[18] Stead's little artist is foregrounded not only because the text is interested in the artist – in development, in emotional and physical landscapes – but because the individual is the 'reality' that history in its broad-strokes so often hides. The democratised historiography of the latter part of the twentieth century – the period in which Curl Skidmore (and C.K. Stead) taught in the university – becomes a kind of handmaiden to the reality that fiction, with its incessant specificity, its all-important detail, was limning all along. In looking inward to understand himself – an enterprise that ultimately fails – Skidmore opens up the porous connections between self and space, between politics and life, and like Stead's unusually loping sentences (a stylistic rarity in his fiction) the space of self maps onto

[17] C.K Stead, *All Visitors Ashore*, 128.

[18] E.P. Thompson, *The Making of The English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968), 12.

the space of society. *All Visitor's Ashore*, then, becomes a kind of cartographic exercise – if an uncertain one – an attempt to map out the geography of self.[19]

Before examining each novel in turn, it is worth pointing out the compressed acuity in each – the way in which style and structure at a syntactic level build and help shatter the shape of these deceptively slim volumes. Artistic intent is baked into the very first sentence: the shape of story revealed, the mode of inquiry (and these are inquisitive novels) outlined in style and shape. First, *The Ghost Writer*:

> It was the last daylight hour of a December afternoon more than twenty years ago – I was twenty-three, writing and publishing my first short stories, and like many a *Bildungsroman* hero before me, already contemplating my own massive *Bildungsroman* – when I arrived at his hideaway to meet the great man.[20]

Roth for the most part spins tales from sentences deceptively simple and idiomatic. The syntactic complexity and loping twilight tone are atypical of this (and most) Roth novels. Note the semi-parenthetical dashes, embedding the ironical self-critique that as the novel goes on is left implicit. Youth and beginning, then, are wrapped in a tone that's all past, past tense: 'the last daylight hour…', and 'more than twenty years ago'. These constructions are unusually formal for Roth, they have the tone of an older man. The *Bildungsroman* is cited twice inside the parenthetical, but really invoked thrice: the acknowledgement of a kind of comical ambitiousness in the writer, of that being a feature of the classical *Bildungsroman* (David Copperfield, recall, becomes a writer) and yet made modern and aware – this text knows where it ends up, and it knows the reader knows. The layered consciousness, the winking mention of the pretensions of the young writer who is, in fact, now the

[19] A notion I have discussed in a different context: Jordan Margetts, "I see you, CK Stead." *The Spinoff*, 28 November, 2020, accessed 28 July, 2021, https://thespinoff.co.nz/books/28-11-2020/i-see-you-ck-stead/

[20] Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, 3.

older writer actually constructing the story that enshrines him as the hero mirrors the structure of the text. First an arrival long ago, then a breakdown in form where Zuckerman contemplates his own centrality and loses it in the process of his myth making, then an ending focussed again on the 'great man', this mentor, this faux father. The pace of the sentence, its concerns, are a kind of précis of the novel as a whole: the way that expansion in *The Ghost Writer* comes from textual and psychic inwardness – that parenthetical – from the relation and deconstruction of a single episode, an evening, a night, a morning.

All Visitor's Ashore opens with a kind of Proustian flourish – banal tea towel in place of delicate madeleine – in that fragile present tense. Coincidentally there is a master here too, Melior Farbro:

> Let's begin with the tea towel – it's hanging over a string so the string curves downward under the sink bench and Melior Farbro, the old master, who is not so old, a little over fifty like the century itself and in good shape despite his limp and his endless complaints about corns, piles, tinea, peptic ulcers, migraine, bends down to dry his fingers on its brown checks.[21]

Not the dense, internal, analytic structure of Roth's opening, but a meandering pace, opening outwards – a flow like time, or water. The present tense is so important to this novel – to the interaction of memory, the presence of the past in the present. It generates action but, as in the chapter title 'The Dreamtime' (taken from Australian Aboriginal mythology), we get a sense of the past even in this present, a kind of dream present, where details float by, glossed with a summer's haze. Later, of course, the tenses start to jumble, the time of writing floats to the surface. The narrator says of Cecilia Skyways that she 'lives inside her memories', a good description of the inner life of this novel too – memory as present, memory summoned up. Yet there's

[21] Stead, *All Visitors Ashore*, 1.

direction too – Proust's memories are presented as involuntary, Skidmore's are not – 'Let's begin', a chatty declaration of narratorial control. Skidmore (as narrator) is selecting detail, examining it and bringing it forth, but not with a fully involuntary pretence. It's this balance between control and momentum, past-tone and present-tense, that creates this dreamtime quality, this floating world.[22] There's a sense, too, of the modernist literary project, not only Proust, but Pound and Woolf – that famous making new, *a la* Ezra Pound who, of course, was Eliot's Melior Farbro, the greater craftsman of *The Wasteland*. The focus on the tea towel that moves and expands into a larger and larger world resonates with Virginia Woolf's 'A Mark on The Wall' which wraps around the notion of sensorially evocative object, the normal cheap world as a kind of portal, if not to the soul then at least the psyche: 'How readily our thoughts swarm upon a new object, lifting it a little way, as ants carry a blade of straw so feverishly, and then leave it....'[23] Yet where Proust seems to worship and cherish a lost past, and Woolf, in this same story seems to quietly, perhaps grimly, expound on the possibilities that open out to the imagination from a singularity (a mundane singularity) – Stead's construction weaves the two along with a kind of practical, almost self-deprecating grime. The brown checked tea towel, this squalid thing, this purely pragmatic thing, and from here comes this dreamtime wash of the past, or at least pastness.

We see the legacies of modernism in both, in *The Ghost Writer* a kind of structural examination of mechanics – and ultimately a kind of implied refutation of those mechanics. In *All Visitor's Ashore*, a more sensory, evocative, and rhythmic structure – more a summoning up than an examination of. Shared from the first sentence too, is the focus on the mentor figure as plot structure and cathectic focal point. The young artist begins the process of echo-locating place in relation to the

[22] *Ibid*, 2.

[23] Virginia Woolf, 'The Mark on the Wall,' in *Monday or Tuesday* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company Inc, 1921).

elder; this echo-locating, this figuring out literary space by bouncing off the walls of experience, of self and other, becomes the defining impulse in both novels.

The Ghost Writer is perhaps the classic example of the difficulty in taxonomizing a Roth novel.[24] That tension between the postmodern architecture of the book and its realist, even mimetic, heart. To understand the complicated structure of the book, and particularly the way in which a lengthy counterfactual hypothetical about Anne Frank's survival bleeds into the rest of the novel, we need to look to a piece Roth wrote fourteen years before, in 1972, an essay-story hybrid called 'I Always Wanted You to Admire My Fasting: or, Looking at Kafka'.[25] The basic structure is familiar to anyone who has read *The Ghost Writer*, though less complex, less integrated, less explosive. Roth begins an entirely standard critical essay on Kafka and in particular provides a reading of the story 'The Burrow', in a sort of biographical context, arguing the story moves beyond parable and into a portrait of the artist. Being Roth, he links the image of the burrow to 'a fantasy of hidden orifices' centred around his companion Dora Dymant. This is a stable, fairly scholarly, Freud inflected reading of the story suggesting nothing beyond Roth's critical capacity until the hinge that begins: '1942. I am nine; my Hebrew-school teacher, Dr. Kafka, is fifty-nine.'[26] And on this axis the essay becomes a story, and a quintessentially Rothian story at that – young Roth nicknames him 'Dr *Kishka*', Yiddish for 'insides', a reference to halitosis. Roth's warm, overbearing Jewish family invite the teacher to dinner, attempt to set him up with their

[24] Even this becomes complicated and diffuse. Zuckerman first appeared as a kind of fictional doppelganger for Peter Tarnopal in Philip Roth, *My Life as a Man* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985). There's debate around whether or not this Zuckerman is the 'same' Zuckerman to appear in so many of Roth's novels from *The Ghost Writer* onwards.

[25] Philip Roth, *Reading Myself and Others* (London: Vintage, 2016), 281-302.

[26] *Ibid*, 291.

aunt, the attempt fails after initial promise. Years later Kafka dies, 'leaving no books'. Roth's thematic crescendo links the hypothetical to the critical:

> …no *Trial*, no *Castle*, no Diaries…Thus all trace of Dr. Kafka disappears. Destiny being destiny, how could it be otherwise? Does the land surveyor reach the Castle? Does K. escape the judgement of the Court, or George Bendemann the judgement of his father? "Well, clear this out now!' said the overseer, and they buried the hunger artist, straw and all." No it simply is not in the cards for Kafka to ever become *the* Kafka – why, that would be stranger even than a man turning into an insect. No one would believe it, Kafka least of all.[27]

How do life and death play on the artist? Not only as abstract notions – the artist ruminating – but as lived experience, as afterlife, as facts. Roth's part-thesis about 'The Burrow' signals a concern that will come to consume the Zuckerman novels:

> …more than a metaphor for the insanely defended ego, whose striving for invulnerability produces a defensive system that must in its turn become the object of perpetual concern – there is also a very unromantic and hard-headed fable about how and why art is made, a portrait of the artist in all his ingenuity, anxiety, isolation, dissatisfaction, relentlessness, obsessiveness, secretiveness, paranoia, and self-addiction, a portrait of the magical thinker at the end of his tether, Kafka's Prospero.[28]

The piece is unclassifiable – Roth collects it with his essays while Ann Charters includes it in her mammoth edited volume *The Story and Its Writer An Introduction to Short Fiction*, unproblematically calling it a short story.[29] And while the piece itself is not our primary focus, the way in which Roth throws the aims of interpretative criticism – an artform trapped by the art that makes its subject, its material – in sharp relief by stepping out of the non and into the fiction. Perhaps the

---

[27] *Ibid*, 302.

[28] *Ibid*, p.290.

[29] Ann Charters, *The Story and Its Writer* (New York: Bedford, 2003), 1058 – 1075.

piece is meta-criticism, and like meta-fiction strikes one as honest about the task, honest about the reality of the human behind the critical façade. If the sole matter of a piece of writing is the interpretation of fiction – the invented, imagined, non-real – then calling it non-fiction seems an academic artifice. Is the story we tell about the meaning of a story suddenly fact, or is it a kind of fiction too, if a restricted one?

The use of the hypothetical in *The Ghost Writer* is more sophisticated, and more integrated, by whole orders of magnitude compared with Roth's essay. Where in 'Looking at Kafka' Roth uses the novelistic imagination, the 'what if' that he's referred to as the province of the novelist, to challenge formal interpretative criticism, in *The Ghost Writer* the nature of the intellectual attack does not only challenge form – what is real in a work made up? – but links inextricably with the display of selfhood and becomes a kind of conduit for the fractal patterning of self, psychology, society and history. The third section of the novel, 'Femme Fatale', employs a similar kind of hinge to the Kafka essay in what to this point has been a straightforward narration involving certain fairly conventional digressions – or more to the point, regressions – into Zuckerman's recent past. Given the narratorial set-up, Zuckerman *now* reconstructing Zuckerman *then*, these turns and contextualisations are standard realist storytelling whereby the relevant action takes off in a nexus of mind between narrator and his earlier character, the nature of the reconstruction blurs our ability to draw a distinction between what is tracking to younger Zuckerman's thinking, and what is the narrator's outlining in concrete story what would otherwise be merely subliminal. And these standard turns to the past set up a kind of digressive context that is challenged and torn apart in the third section. In effect there are three digressions, and these serve to set up Zuckerman's experiential set and define what might have been a standard *Bildgunsroman*-type journey: Zuckerman's romantic foibles, his literary stops and starts, particularly the context of his, as it

were, search for a mentor. And his relationship with his father and wider Newark Jewish community. The latter two are increasingly inextricable and what becomes apparent is that fatherhood, symbolic and biological, is the centrifugal core (or centrifugal void) of the novel. The emotional pattern of the novel then moves inward through digressions towards that central issue of fatherhood – and to the invention of Amy Bellette's 'past'.

To begin with the most apparently tangential of the contextualising digressions, the matter of girlfriends, which Zuckerman explains to Lonoff 'to the extent [he] was willing to' – what he does not explain is the slightly sordid, slightly embarrassing, story of his relationship with a flimsy ballerina named Betsy coming to a faintly surreal end:

> Betsy had found out about me and a girl she had known since ballet school. The two of us had kissed over a glass of Gallo in the kitchen, playfully she had shown me the tip of her wine-stained tongue, and I, quick to take heart had pulled her out of her chair and down beside the sink. This took place one evening when Betsy was off dancing at the City Center and the friend had stopped by to pick up a record and investigate a flirtation we'd begun some months earlier …. So, shouldering the burden of perfidy for two, I pinned her pelvis to the kitchen linoleum, while she continued, through moist lips, to inform me of my character flaws. I was then at the stage of my erotic development when nothing excited *me* as much as having intercourse on the floor.[30]

This is the wry middle-aged version of Rothian humour – not the hysterical stand-up sets of *Portnoy's Complaint*, all those exclamation marks and wild, outraged howls – cynical and self-aware. The tone continues from that 'already contemplating his own massive *Bildungsroman*' of the opening. The eyebrow raised. But there's something strategically essential in the passage too: the way the surface of the story, the conversations with Lonoff, continue along

[30] Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, 34.

civilised lines, two writers presenting a semi-public version of their personae to each other, while underneath a messier reality operates. Zuckerman remains civilized and collegial, the eager and promising novice in the presence of the Old Master. So the anecdote about the kitchen floor antics becomes a kind of light taste of the dynamic of performance and interiority that tracks through Zuckerman's night at the house in the Berkshires. This is a sort of riff and refutation of Hemingway's iceberg. No, the story is not just the tip of the iceberg, that's the story of social performance. The novel shows what's beneath. Seen too when the authors discuss Isaac Babel and his comment that the Jewish writer has 'autumn in his heart and spectacles on his nose' (and, Zuckerman muses, 'and blood in his penis').[31] Which of course is a typical Rothian refrain – the intellectual does not exclude the erotic, the bathetic, or indeed the pathetic. So here in the presence of his mentor Zuckerman the narrator weaves in the scatological, the messy, beneath the civilised discussion.

The irony of Zuckerman's upright behaviour is that while he's musing on phalluses and past affairs, while he later masturbates secretly in the study, the other members of the household – Lonoff, Hope, and Amy Belette – are to lesser and greater degrees acting out witnessable *messiness*. Hope, who hopes for very little, only a 'self in the everyday sense', and whose domestic expectations have been crushed by life with a man whose world is consumed by its narrow focus on turning sentences around at the expense of so much *lived experience*.[32] The irony here is that the writer is thoroughly domestic, unromantic, professional, and at the same time eschews even domestic bliss – holidays and changes of pace, new cities, new friends. Hope's desperation, and the dynamic of that specific subject-object pairing, is one Roth makes abundantly clear, and one which becomes poignant

[31] *Ibid*, 49.
[32] *Ibid*, 41.

over dinner and breakfast. We see glimpses of a marital cycle: attempts at support, unintended rejection, and then the crash of relationship history – a seemingly discreet moment is then illustrative of the entire etiology of marital strife, of Hope's desperation. Hope's defences are so shattered – the wattage of the self-effacing smile 'awfully dim' – that the veneer of civilization projected by the two authors is shattered in a moment, the tense talk of 'ordinary human pleasures' becomes talk of the ephemeral Belette, and suddenly Hope, who to this point seems to be pleading with Lonoff to enjoy himself, makes clear that she is the real victim of self-denial with a wineglass striking the wall:

> "Chuck me out," she cried, "I want you to chuck me out. Don't tell me you can't, because you must! I want you to! I'll finish the dishes, then chuck me out, tonight! I beg of you – I'd rather live and die alone, I'd rather endure that than another moment of your bravery. I cannot take more moral fiber in the face of life's disappointments! Not yours and not mine! I cannot bear having a loyal, dignified husband who has no illusions about himself *one second more*!"[33]

Recall, of course, the twenty years that elapsed between occurrence and remembrance; the coldness of the professional writer has set in. The narrator, again in this complicated first person reflecting a close third – we never know, thanks to the immediacy of the prose, the line between reported and reflected action (indeed, it's an illusion) – takes the surface drama and plunges us back into his own mess, his heart beating very hard not only because of the 'glass breaking, and the sight of a disappointed woman, miserably weeping', no, this experience was already in Zuckerman 'about a month old'.[34] He's seen this before, in Betsy. What is really impressive here is the icy observation; Lonoff perhaps embarrassed, certainly stoical, as his wife's misery begins exploding at the table, and Zuckerman now and Zuckerman then simply observing before moving on. The scene cuts, near filmic, to the two men sharing a cognac. Roth has said that a writer is the death of the

[33] *Ibid*, 41-42.

[34] *Ibid*, 42.

family – the secrets and tensions all become grist to the mill – and there's something of the fiction-writer as a kind of domestic monster, part observer part tyrant. Lonoff is perfectly content to sacrifice himself to his art, but for him the art is the life. Hope becomes a casualty, a victim. Much the same way that Zuckerman, after Lonoff's suggestion, notes all of this down – it will be fiction someday. Joan Didion said that 'writers are always selling somebody out'.[35] And while, in Didion's essays, that is often the person she's interviewing, the operative word is *always* – and so often it's the real people who are torn up to feed the art. We do not know if Hope is used in fiction by Lonoff, but she is used by Zuckerman here, as is Betsy, as is Amy – the list goes on. The writer is by necessity so often a vampire.[36]

Take Zuckerman's experience with mentorship. As it turns out 'the great man' is really *a* great man, and not even the younger Zuckerman's first choice of mentor: that was Felix Abravanel. Abravanel is a kind of Saul Bellow figure, a literary rock star of the uniquely American post-war kind – the charismatic glitter of celebrity rather than the dour seriousness of Lonoff. The posture of the eager, innocent, faintly bashful prospective mentee genuflecting before the grand old man he so admires is quickly shown up. Abravanel comes up in conversation: Abravanel and Lonoff are in some senses the two sides of an American dyad, the ascetic, a Jewish Emersonian out in the woods, versus the writer as stylish celebrity. Or alternatively Zuckerman's rummaging around Lonoff's study, which turns up two inscribed note-cards:

> Pinned to the bulletin board beside his desk – the cell's only real embellishments – were a little wall calendar from the local bank and two annotated index cards. One card bore a fragmentary sentence ascribed to "Schummann, on Chopin's Scherzo No.2 in B flat minor, Op.31." It read, "…so overflowing with tenderness, boldness, love,

[35] Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (London: 4th Estate, 1968), xiv.

[36] More of this below, regarding Zuckerman's parents. Note this becomes a major theme of the Zuckerman novels, and especially *The Counterlife*, see chapter 2.

> and contempt that it may be compared, not inappropriately, to a poem by Byron."[37]
>
> ….
>
> "We work in the dark – we do what we can – we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art." Sentiments ascribed to a story I did not know by Henry James called "The Middle Years."[38]

There is, in theory, a way one might pose a sort of binary tension, one which Kremer sees applying to Abravenel and Lonoff, 'stylistic polarities represented by Byron and James'.[39] This seems a little simplified, a little too easy – this is a common issue with the critical conversation around the *The Ghost Writer*, a tendency to mistake architecture for the promulgation of didactic assertions, depiction mistaken for opinion. Abravanel is Byronic only in that he is sexually active, that he's magnetic, 'a cross between the lionized Saul Bellow and self-promoting Norman Mailer.'[40] But a Byron-Mailer-Bellow admixture is borderline incoherent unless male lust is enough to establish an entire literary archetype. And if the focus is not the sensibility in the art or even the persona of the artist but a career mode – how should the artist go about the work? – Zuckerman appears to have chosen his model, the writer who reserves life for the page. 'All one's concentration and flamboyance and originality reserved for the gruelling, exultant, transcendent calling. I looked around and I thought, this is how I will live.'[41] And yet this choice was made for him, or at least chance pointed him in Lonoff's direction more than the will had done, for Abravanel, really, was Zuckerman's first port-of-call – the picture of the sophisticate, silent at coffee, leaning 'on his demi-emaciated frame back

---

[37] Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, 76

[38] *Ibid*, 77

[39] Lillian S Kremer, 'Philip Roth's Self-Reflexive Fiction', *Modern Language Studies* 28, no. 3 (1998): 60.

[40] *Ibid*, 60.

[41] Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, 5.

in his chair, looking smooth and strokable as a cat in his teaching attire…hands and ankles elegantly crossed'.[42] But alas this writerly picture, while friendly, does not scoop Zuckerman up as an heir – and immediately on recalling the coffee with Abravanel and company the retelling ends with: 'All this was why, from Quahsay, I had mailed my four published stories to Lonoff. Felix Abravanel was clearly not in the market for a twenty-three-year-old son.'[43]

Though more important than the style of the man – the portly, bald old man, or the feline man-of-letters type – is the division between the life and the work. Roth is not so simplistic as to assume that the division is as simple as fun versus privation, or publicity versus privacy, or indeed satyriasis versus impotence. Abravanel too, it seems, holds back the essential qualities that go into the prose, which is described as nostalgic and energetic and chaotic. Abravanel the man is a quiet, faintly effete sort of figure:

> So genteel and assured and courtly was the posture he'd assumed to listen to Andrea tell her stories that I found myself doubting it. Out in the open, Abravanel's cup did not spill over with sentiment for the old days in L.A.; such effusions he left to readers of his novels who had come to love the super-charged emotional world of his childhood as though it had been their own. He himself seemed to prefer to look down at us from a long way off, like a llama or a camel.[44]

So really the figures are not opposing models in some deep binary about the mode of art (and recall, we never see the fiction of either), but represent more the thrashing about a young writer does when figuring out a persona, a goal for life out in the world. This too is about surface and depth: not only the implied rejection – which is really only a disappointed day-dream – but also the real core, the younger Zuckerman's hunt for a mentor, which the older narrator implies is,

---

[42] *Ibid*, 64.
[43] *Ibid*, 66.
[44] *Ibid*, 65.

really, personal. The tension underlying the novel is Zuckerman's struggle with patrimony, his struggle with his father.

And the father is key to Zuckerman's double-layered mosaic of personal history: the key to the surface plot of the novel, and the key to its most wild and experimental leap. Zuckerman says so himself, this is not only a search for literary mentorship, but in some way a search for a new father wholesale. Zuckerman's father, his good and loving and concerned and supportive father, has rapidly become a kind of bowdlerizer, the young man's short story based on his great aunt Meema Chaya – about family and money, greed and hard work and generational change – has caused not only offence of the standard kind but has brought out a deep-seated fear (if not paranoia) about the way Goy readership might interpret the piece not as a literary object but a sociological, or more specifically ethnological one. In effect, Zuckerman's father rings a little of Yakov Blotnik, the Jewish émigré in Roth's at the time controversial story 'The Conversion of the Jews', whose mental world fractures cleanly into 'things that were good-for-the-Jews or no-good-for-the-Jews.'[45] Less of a cartoon, or less universal in his Manichean division, but this binary thinking is in effect the imposition of a single, extra-artistic, concern – that the story is 'not-so-good-for-the-Jews'. The father's binary philistinism should not be misconstrued for a textual binary (*a la* Kremer), the novel itself does not create a distinction between adherence to art and the adherence to cultural sensitivity (or political pragmatism), though this is so evidently the shield which the younger Zuckerman hides behind – the division rather is between the complexity represented by the text overall, and the simplicity of Zuckerman *père* on the moral implications of the text. He enlists his own mentor (or, perhaps, idol) Judge Leopald Wapter, who reads the story and sends Zuckerman a letter and preposterous questionnaire:

[45] Philip Roth, *Goodbye Columbus and Five Short Stories* (London: Vintage, 1959), 130.

TEN QUESTIONS FOR NATHAN ZUCKERMAN

1. If you had been living in Nazi Germany in the thirties would you have written such a story?
2. Do you believe Shakespeare's Shylock and Dickens's Fagin have been of no use to anti-Semites?
3. Do you practice Judaism? If so, how? If not, what credentials qualify you for writing about Jewish life for national magazines?
4. Would you claim that the characters in your story represent a fair sample of the kinds of people that make up a typical contemporary community of Jews?
5. In a story with a Jewish background, what reason is there for a description of physical intimacy between a married Jewish man and an unmarried Christian woman? Why in a story with a Jewish background must there be (a) adultery; (b) incessant fighting within a family over money; (c) warped human behavior in general?
6. What set of aesthetic values make you think that the cheap is more valid than the noble and the slimy is more truthful than the sublime?
7. What in your character makes you associate so much of life's ugliness with Jewish people?
8. Can you explain why in your story, in which a rabbi appears, there is nowhere the grandeur of oratory with which Stephen S. Wise and Abba Hillel Silver and Zvi Masliansky have stirred and touched their audiences?
9. Aside from the financial gain to yourself, what benefit do you think publishing this story in a national magazine will have for (a) your family; (b) your community; (c) the Jewish religion; (d) the well-being of the Jewish people?
10. Can you honestly say that there is anything in your short story that would not warm the heart of a Julius Streicher or a Joseph Goebbels?[46]

Appropriate that the character of the judge administers this questionnaire (and a faux-flattering letter too) – not only symbolic of both justice and its associated morality, and not only of 'the Jew who has gained position and esteem in the gentile world', but of the gavel, the hard thud of community standards imposed from above on the individual, and the legal profession broadly which involves the analysis and manipulation of strict language, a struggle around definitions and

[46] Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, 102-104.

completeness.[47] The letter is a rhetorical trick, a trap, and transparently so. The intention becomes flagrant in question six – the question is weighed in only one direction, it already reaches the implied conclusion – the work is ugly, the work is not only not transcendent, it is morally repugnant, this conclusion is framed as the tenth question, referring to the anti-Semitic propagandists for the Nazis, Streicher and Goebbels. The story then, is condemned not only as a kind of embarrassment, or a kind of betrayal of privacy – and that authorial vampirism is present here, too, the pillaging of family history, family gossip, to make art – but a Nazi-compatible betrayal of American Jewry.

The struggle with the father is, then, a struggle with the community too. Or the struggle with community is, in fact, a struggle with the father. But it is important to understand the interplay of conflicting emotional valences at play in Nathan's turning over these facts – in the way they merge with the current story of the evening at Lonoff's and the flight into fancy to come – and the framing of them largely in the 'Nathan Dedalus' chapter. The young man's literary ambition is, as above, often split into simplistic and binary terms by critics too attached to causal relationships, too focussed on attempting to draw forth lessons. Clark Hendly, in a very early piece on Zuckerman, identifying the obvious relationship with the *Bildungsroman,* reads the book in only those terms, he insists that Nathan is moving from the family to the art in a linear progression that maps the nineteenth century *Bildungsroman* hero, 'Nathan actually thrills to such misunderstandings with his father and the obtuse Judge Wapter, for in his defense of art against these philistines he places himself in the heady company of his literary predecessors.'[48] This reading is simplistic – Nathan is horrified, rejected, and upset too. So

[47] Clark W Hendley, "An Old Form Revitalized: Philip Roth's Ghost Writer and The Bildungsroman," *Studies in the Novel* 16, no. 1 (2010): 90.
[48] *Ibid*, 92.

when Hendly goes to claim that the novel represents an exchange of '[Zuckerman's] Judaism for his art, his new religion', he effectively re-writes the novel in a simpler, stupider, image.[49] The elation of the personal literary cause, *and* its insecurity, its seeming to go against the reasonable standards of the community, *and* the thrills of a more nebulous (more permissive) new artistic community, all of this is essential to the artist. So the joy of falling into line with the great predecessors is also the devastating loss of family, and community, who feel betrayed – not simply the superior artist versus the philistines, but the son divided from a beloved father; not a victory but a trauma. And to read Zuckerman's tone as simply glad to move into this Joycean company is to miss the point: Joyce never gave up Ireland even though he left it forever, and Zuckerman is not giving up his Judaism, his family, or his Newark community – the trauma of the separation is key to how the artist develops, it is not a battle against simple nay-sayers standing in the way. Zuckerman, like Joyce, is no Nietzchean, there is no quality of the artist as *Ubermensch* leaving the weak in his wake in a climb to artistic supremacy – it is love that drives this novel, the sense of rejection from the father in the face of love, the way art can enshrine and highlight the rhythms of community is not an attempt to destroy it but a kind of celebration. The art itself may be a higher, even transcendent thing, but the artist is just as fallible, just as banal, just as lecherous as anyone else – Roth makes this point over and over again in his fiction. The celebration is *also* a kind of vampirism, it really does hurt his family, they are not to be dismissed in some sweeping aside of the plebs; this is the crux.

The language of binaries needs to be sorted out and swept aside before discussing the all-important third chapter, 'Femme Fatale'. The presence of binaries in *The Ghost Writer* is only illusory, and Kremer's assertion that 'Roth juxtaposes binary oppositions—bad son/ good

[49] *Ibid*, 95.

daughter, martyred wife/ sensual mistress, biological father/ literary father, indulgence/ asceticism, Abravanel/ Lonoff, stylistic polarities represented by Byron and James—to usher his aspiring writer through encounters influencing his personal and professional maturity' is also a kind of simplification, turning the novel back towards the classical *Bildungsroman* and away from the kind of thematic *disunity* that characterises the book.[50] Calling these oppositions 'binaries' does not strike me as a useful construction – it suggests, as Kremer and Hendley variously do, that these represent forking paths for the artist, who must choose between strict opposites in order to navigate his early career. And yet what we see really is the slow breaking down of boundaries – in the same way that the surface tension of the novel is a kind of still pool, a kind of illusory meniscus that elides turbulent emotional depths – and breaking of expected roles. Lonoff is not merely the alternate, or opposite, of Abravanel, they both hide themselves from the crowd, though they publicise themselves differently. Lonoff might 'reject' the bustle of civilian life but emotional turmoil of the most distracting kind exists right there in his home: the unhappily drained wife, the desperately in love (though of course, this is partly Zuckerman's imagining) ingénue, the smashed dishware. Human complexities are not easily boiled down into binary systems. It seems, rather, that the *Bildungsroman* in its simplest traditional form is too all consuming and final: inexperience to experience. And even the parodical tone of the opening sentence of this book hints at the foolishness of this sort of thinking. So when Zuckerman the junior sits in the study and fantasises, his own quotidian emotional reality comes to bear on his imaginative leap – he imagines himself dating a created Anne Frank, the ultimate showing of his Judaism, not a refutation of his community but a fantasy of winning them over. The next morning after his sleepless night: 'Throughout breakfast, my father, my mother, the

[50] Lillian S Kremer, 'Philip Roth's Self-Reflexive Fiction', 60.

judge and Mrs Wapter were never out of my thoughts.'[51] The material of the novel is not binary, then, but tensions which cut in and out of each other, tensions inextricable.

In the heady late-night confusion of an emotionally charged day the younger Zuckerman lays back and gives way to a mental leap which the older Zuckerman will later write – where Amy Belette transforms into Anne Frank, holocaust survivor. This leap into the hypothetical is both a very sophisticated metafictional creation – a *mise en abyme* of a peculiar kind, one *Bildungsroman* inside another, constructed by the hero of the first – as well as a kind of emotional release. The pressures mount upon Zuckerman's psyche: the anxiety about mentorship, about a literary career, the life of the artist, about girlfriends and wives, and especially about the father, about Jewish heritage and community sanction. The step into this imaginary world is a self-indulgence, a fantasy, a way to show the father that he is not a disloyal Jew (a boon to Goebbels). The next morning Nathan the solipsist thinks about parading Anne Frank before his family, a co-writer, a girlfriend, a justification – 'throughout breakfast, my father, my mother, the judge and Mrs Wapter were never out of my thoughts….I kept seeing myself coming back to New Jersey and saying to my family, "I met a marvelous young woman while up in New England. I love her and she loves me"…. "Nathan, is she Jewish?" "Yes, she is." "But who is she?" "Anne Frank."'[52] And yet the fiction within turns away from Nathan's personal concerns, his worries and anxieties and becomes a moving story in its own right. Not only a resurrection, Anne lives again – and is given the literary success she deserves – but a fully realised and complicated person who escapes the life of Anne Frank the symbol, Anne Frank the product, while retaining the awful power of the work in leaving her wartime identity as it was: in the public eye Anne Frank

[51] Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, 158.
[52] *Ibid,* 157-158.

remains dead, and the talented young woman who experienced all of this lives on, the writer divorced from her public, by necessity removed from her father, transplanted into a new world and a new language as well as a new name.

The through-lines are immediately obvious: the separation from the father, the responsibility to Jewry, the operation of the symbol. Judge Wapter uses the Anne Frank play, a show that really premiered on Broadway in the fifties to great success, as a shining example of public Jewish excellence – a chipper beatifying Broadway show that scrubbed Anne Frank clean of the historical crime which eventually crushed her, and which finally motivated Cynthia Ozick to famously write:

> But the diary itself, richly crammed though it is with incident and passion, cannot count as Anne Frank's story. A story may not be said to be a story if the end is missing. And because the end is missing, the story of Anne Frank in the fifty years since *The Diary of a Young Girl* was first published has been bowdlerized, distorted, transmuted, traduced, reduced; it has been infantilised, Americanised, homogenized, sentimentalized; falsified, kitschified, and, in fact, blatantly and arrogantly denied. Among the falsifiers and bowdlerizers have been dramatists and directors, translators and litigators, Anne Frank's own father, and even – or especially – the public, both readers and theatregoers, all over the world.[53]
>
> ….
>
> Evisceration, an elegy for the murdered. Evisceration by blurb and stage, by shrewdness and naivete, by cowardice and spirituality, by forgiveness and indifference, by success and money, by vanity and rage, by principle and passion, by surrogacy and affinity. Evisceration by fame, by shame, by blame. By uplift and transcendence. By usurpation.[54]

[53] Cynthia Ozick, 'Who Owns Anne Frank', in *Letters of Intent (*London: Atlantic Books, 2017), 390.
[54] *Ibid*, 406.

Ozick, I should note, goes on to wish the very opposite for the diary, not that Anne and the diary both survive, one allowing the other to go out into the world as a symbol around which to hook moral consciousness, she rather wishes the diary was burned, that it was swept away, rather than made into a salvific symbol for mass comfort and consumption.[55]

Roth takes a different path to Ozick; he lacks her rabbinical stridency, her mistrust of manipulation, the definite conviction about hard truths and hard lies. However, like Ozick, Roth (via Zuckerman) sees Anne Frank the musical as a kind of publicity exercise – approved of by Wapter for the message it transmits about Jewish tenacity to the Goy – and what this chapter hinges on is the way the creation of imagined life exceeds Zuckerman's self-interested fantasy of using the symbol, and not the 'real' person beneath.

Anne Frank's story in 'Femme Fatal' is a near typical story of twentieth century (and especially Jewish) deracination. First to England as an orphan, looked after by foster families, an object of pity and a focus of hand-wringing guilt – the kind of thing we would now call 'white guilt'. A kindly teacher blunders along, attempting to make polite and reasoned conversation with the young holocaust survivor:

> 'Amy silently drank her tea and ate her lovely tart, while Miss Giddings, like one of her own history students, tried in vain to understand the past, "Why is it," the unhappy teacher finally asked, "that for centuries people have hated you Jews?" Amy rose to her feet. She was stunned. "Don't ask me that!" the girl said – "ask the madmen who hate us!" And she had nothing further to do with Miss Giddings as a friend – or with anyone else who asked her anything about what they couldn't possibly understand.'[56]

The hatred of the oppressor is made, in a simple question, a kind of accusation. Not that the teacher intended to accuse, but the way in

[55] *Ibid*, 407.

[56] Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, 131.

which the Jewish experience of oppression is transformed into near action – the Jews must have some idea *why* they were so hated. But the core of the experience is not in explanation, but raw fact, six million slaughtered, mechanised death, industrial murder committed by an advanced western government. And at once the balance is being struck between the author (the imagination) and the art: Zuckerman has his own reasons to be interested in these questions, and to have Anne deny her heritage in foster homes to the disappointment of her Jewish carers, her own desire to be exceptional not for being a victim, but for being an actor. There is a crass mirror here to Zuckerman's desires, motivated by his own sense that he is perhaps insufficiently Jewish, not enough a Jewish victim, and now told he is a public embarrassment to other Jews. And yet the text itself, as Frank's story spins out, does not crassly misrepresent her, turn her into some example by which Zuckerman can forge on. Her story becomes her own, it escapes the imaginer.

Anne's father, of course, is the emotional burden she bears – her connection to her own pre-history, her only living family, at first she only intends to keep her survival from him for a short time. But as time grows, with the discovery that *she* is being published, the decision to remain dead – or to leave the girl who wrote then died in the grave – begins to calcify. And the father is then left to suffer so the art might continue to grow. Much as Kafka, in Roth's essay, died and set in motion the events that brought his art to the public, Anne, Amy, sees the power of her own death to 'make the nightmare real'.[57] Contra Ozick, then, the diary's survival is important so that the real horror can be shown in its own picture of the unfinished, the strident claim to be 'in a great adventure' made horrible by our knowledge of how Anne's story ends, and the book does not. She sees that alone she was not Jewish *enough*, in some senses, not enough an explanation for the

[57] *Ibid*, 144.

mindless hatred visited on her (notes of Zuckerman's anxieties floating here):

> …and none of it made any difference. Europe was not theirs nor were they Europe's, not even her Europeanized family. Instead, three flights up from a pretty Amsterdam canal, they lived crammed into a hundred square feet with the Van Daans, as isolated and despised as any ghetto Jews. First expulsion, next confinement, and then, in cattle cars and camps and ovens, obliteration. And why? Because the Jewish problem to be solved, the degenerates whose contamination civilized people could no longer abide, were they themselves.
>
> ….
>
> This was the lesson that on the journey home she came to believe she had the power to teach. But only if she were believed to be dead.[58]

And this fades into an almost utilitarian argument – that the power of the art to move and convince hinges on the tragedy which birthed it. But the imagined story pushes further, out from the pragmatic (the Anne of Wapter, the Anne of salvific symbol) into a personal, more emotional, purer artistry – what began as a diary becomes a resurrection in itself, to give life back to the murdered on those pages, 'the improvement of the living was their business, not hers…Her responsibility was to the dead, if to anyone – to her sister, to her mother, to all the slaughtered schoolchildren who had been her friends. There was her diary's purpose, there was her ordained mission: to restore in print their status as flesh and blood…for all the good it would do them.'[59] And here in these lines some kind of dark, and morally profound, alchemy takes place. We think so much about how life transmogrifies into art; but here art transmogrifies into life – inside a fiction inside a fiction.

---

[58] *Ibid*, 145.

[59] *Ibid*, 146-147.

The story Roth creates for Anne Frank, in the mind of the goofy and conspicuously immature young novelist as remembered by the cynical and wiser middle-aged novelist, is wildly complicated – and not easily moralised. A running theme in the criticism is tying the book generally, and this chapter specifically, into a *Bildungsroman* structure – Nathan learns, Nathan grows. And so we have arguments which tend to treat the leap too narrowly, where Hendly claims that the form is 'both utilized and corrupted, adopted and rejected' he still reads the book in this narrow way: this scheme of learning and growing, if a fragmentary version thereof.[60] And Slivka sees Zuckerman as adopting the Anne Frank 'cult of personality' (the kind of thing Ozick rallies against), only to give it up as it 'disintegrates'.[61] But these readings seem to miss the explosion of the form – the way the *Bildungsroman* itself drops away. No real lessons here, only bits of life, moments that remain in memory, recorded. And the 'invented' stories about Anne Frank do not disintegrate at all; they become the substance of this novel. They become a novel about the first draft of a novel, about how a young man's moving through the world is also the accretion of instances which may form the blocks of fiction – how the fiction itself moves beyond the often tawdry emotions of the novelist.

Zuckerman himself may wish or have wished as a young man in the study that night to draw Anne Frank to himself. But in the process of imagining her she escaped him, just as life escaped his fantasy. All that was left of these encounters and moments are the fragments collected to make a novel, a *poioumenon* which fundamentally rejects the form it seems to take: art is not made via the *Bildgunsroman*, but via imaginative leaps and mysterious alchemical spaces where context and intention melt into one another. Lonoff leaves Zuckerman with a

[60] Clark W Hendley, "An Old Form Revitalized: Philip Roth's Ghost Writer and The Bildungsroman", 89.
[61] Jennifer A. Slivka, 'History and the "I" Trapped in the Middle: Negotiating the Past in Roth's The Ghost Writer and The Plot Against America', *Philip Roth Studies* 8, no 2 (2012): 129.

quiet acknowledgement of exactly this, pointing him to paper to make his 'feverish notes', saying only 'I'll be curious to see how we come out someday. It could be an interesting story.'[62] The reconstruction, then, becomes a deconstruction too: the outer story gives way to interrelated tensions and confusions which, ironically enough, the form of the novel attempts to make cohere – *The Ghost Writer* is, then, a work which celebrates the incoherent origins of a coherent work of art, itself.

There is something revealing, perhaps, in the distinctions in physical orientation between Stead and Roth's novels. *The Ghost Writer* involves the literary ascent, if you will, up the hill and away into the snowy hillside, but the turning in and up, into colonial New England, into Connecticut, into the WASP heart of American culture where one first generation Jewish writer has already planted his feet there in the snow, and now another comes as supplicant. The travel in *The Ghost Writer*, which is all implicit of course, is *into* America – from the Jewish space to the space of the WASPs with their faux-old families and faux-old houses, to look back into America's literary past; the house belongs to an old goy family (Hope's) and in the study the notes reach back, to Henry James 'the master', and to louche Europe and Byron. The connections are profoundly American then, a geography vast and accessed by European explorers via the Atlantic – a kind of European façade in the old thirteen colonies, in the anglicism of the architecture, and in the melange of twentieth century immigration. The literary youngster, at this point, sees American writing as essential as well as central – the world really is America now. The literature here, looks to a country it finds its own, even if it is one in askance relationship to its east coast Jewish population, and their burgeoning literature – a

[62] Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, 180.

literature about to become ascendant, with Bellow, with Mailer, with Roth.

As American literature transforms itself through a new cold war teleology – the centre, now – New Zealand languishes in self-conscious obscurity. Where *The Ghost Writer* is written and narrated in the late seventies and set in the late fifties, *All Visitors Ashore* is published in nineteen eighty-four and set in nineteen fiftyone – and the existential and spatial orientation of each highlights the way in which geography and the history of cultural power plays on novelistic self-creation. What Calder refers to as 'the gap distance opens out between here and there' is the space to which the eye of the novel is drawn.[63] Which is to say that the way Skidmore pieces himself together in remembrance of this slice of things past is constantly negotiating a particular form of this 'here and there' distinction: one defined by time and culture in the first place – by Stead's effective Anglo-, or at least Euro- centrism[64] – New Zealand of the fifties looked *so much* more to England; and defined by an Auckland-specific version of this gap in the second. If Pakeha stories in New Zealand are defined by both 'physical remoteness and insignificance'.[65] then Auckland can be seen as an extreme as well as peculiar version of this syndrome. Auckland embodies a series of contradictions: the country's greatest and most populous city, even in the fifties, but barely a town on a world scale, very much an 'un-Manhattan' with its tiny high street, coffee shops selling pies, its bakeries, its unobstructed views of sea and sky. It faces the outside world, the harbour, the ships, but it *feels* as well as *is* so very far away – months by boat. So the young and ambitious Aucklander of the fifties

[63] Alex Calder, *The Settler's Plot: How Stories Take Place in New Zealand* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2011), 189.

[64] See Stead's comments about feeling Europe 'the real centre of the civilised world' – his parenthetical remark '…perhaps not only to the Eurocentric mind', does not in fact deflect charges of the same. This is not a criticism per se, but a fact of his art, the orientation is always New Zealand in reference the specific 'there' of England and Europe. C.K. Stead, *You Have A Lot to Lose* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2020), 177.

[65] Alex Calder, *The Settler's Plot*, 189.

is especially aware, especially focussed on the sense of looking out beyond that powder-blue Pacific horizon to Europe, to 'there', but is also especially trapped 'here' – the distinction is monumental. Those ships always coming and going, taking friends away and bringing the world to you: but so slowly. By the time of narration (the eighties) Auckland was beginning to take its curious modern shape: a deeply cosmopolitan city which is not at all metropolitan; a place carved for the automobile now, with that iron bridge slicing the harbour and bringing sprawling suburbia to Farbro's (and indeed Sargeson's) Takapuna.[66] Auckland is New Zealand's liminal city – it's *here*, but focussed, really, on *there*. Endless parochial grumbling about the Aucklander who knows the world so much better than she knows her own country is tied up in this: resenting not only the biggest city, but resenting the way it seems to highlight that distance to *there*. And yet the spaces of Auckland, especially before that harbour bridge, those vast motorways, those glass-front law and council offices – are themselves so *here*, those 'special places – the beach, the farm, the bush, the suburb', so particular of this warm and wet and placid sub-tropical isthmus at the bottom of the world, the nights very long even in summer and the sea pounamu-green near the shore and deep blue in the distance.

Stead in many ways is *the* writer of the Auckland-here-and-there, his own life a negotiation between the Northern and Southern hemispheres, here and there, that 'pull of a compass'.[67] In some ways *All Visitors Ashore* shows the needle of the compass moving – from a kind of complacency, towards a real leaving, though one that only eventuates after the novel's end. Every novel is defined by space, by

[66] Which is to say: an ethnically diverse and immigrant-heavy population, multi-cultural and increasingly even multi-lingual, but not at a functioning or fundamentally urban space. In a sense the opposite of a city like Tokyo: a vast metropolis, curiously un-cosmopolitan, vast and almost mechanical in its modern urbanity, while being mono-cultural in the extreme.
[67] Alex Calder, *The Settler's Plot,* 189.

internal as well as authorial setting, but especially so – or at least uniquely so – in New Zealand. *The Ghost Writer* is, I have argued, a conceptual novel and a novel about its own concept. Not so with *All Visitor's Ashore*, the New Zealander is obsessed with physical space, and this novel is fundamentally tied to its Auckland geography, space and place define the shape of the novel, studded with departures, divided by the harbour, looking always to and beyond Rangitoto. Where *The Ghost* Writer involves that apparently lengthy journey away into the mountains it is still, after all, only a short drive. This is a whole order of magnitude different to the New Zealand experience, no short drive to zones of literary historical import, no mere drives and snow, but whole oceans. Facing away – beyond that most iconic of Auckland's volcanic cones – is also facing back, part of being home is looking far away, it is part of being in Stead's Auckland to be looking far, far away.

The novel's opening salvo, that present tense evocation of quotidian home-life mingled with the relative glamour of the artist – Melior Farbro and his art, young Skidmore with those novels inside of his head – spins along, creating a kind of miasma of present-ness (recall, the novel reveals its own time of narration, but later). Take Skidmore and Farbro rolling smokes:

> He rolled himself a cigarette and passed the makings to Curl who is expertly following suit, keeping the paper moving at the tips of his ginger fingers, pinching the strands from either end after the last deft roll-and-lick-and-roll. The light passes from one to the other and there is the silence of satisfied in-breath while they hold it there, letting the smoke hang a while in the lungs, pleasantly agitating, and with no sense in either of vast dark consequences to come, this being 1951 and it being the mark of manhood and the seal of friendship to exchange the poison weed and set it smoking down there inside you.[68]

The social detail, and the loping pace, curiously enough is typical of Stead's poetry more than his prose. *All Visitor's Ashore* seems to find

[68] C.K. Stead, *All Visitor's Ashore*, 3.

small details like nails jutting out of smooth wood – something that hooks attention, the mind wrapping around it, and the sentences following suit, longer and more rhythmic than Stead's typical fictional prose, though still composed of accreted simple images. Those rolled cigarettes, their visceral physicality, the reader can almost taste the smoke – this passage is only two sentences, and yet draws to itself a social history of smoking, revealing something of the time-of-writing despite its present tense. The present tense, really, is a present *sense*, 'I write it all as if it is happening now because that is how it seems'.[69] That awareness that cigarettes are carcinogenic, terminally dangerous, hanging over the quotidian satisfaction of a moment's habit. Only a minor instance, but one giving way to a larger sense, a sense that defines the novel, of this middle time in this distant space. Stead, never one for humility, in his second volume of memoir quotes Alan Curnow saying he has a 'genius for cities'.[70] What Stead manages over and again in his Auckland-set novels is to evoke the particular way in which a geography imposes itself so thoroughly on the tone and texture of the people in it, the way the psyche is shaped by the land. Take three superlative instances:

> Auckland is a harbour town, a town of two harbours, at the nether end of the world, and 1951 (properly counted) is the first year of the second half of the twentieth century. There are planes in the air, even passenger planes, but still people who travel do it by sea moving with the cargoes and like God upon the faces of the waters. The ships come and go, they are our carriers and links, our assurance that our spacious and beautiful confinement though solitary is not absolute.[71]

> It is summer, the sun is shining, the Gulf is blue and calm, there is a sense of space, the sea spreading away to and around the islands of the Gulf and one big ship going out past Rangitoto through the immense wide gateway to the world.[72]

---

[69] *Ibid*, 51.

[70] C.K. Stead, *You Have A Lot to Lose*, 405.

[71] C.K. Stead, *All Visitor's Ashore*, 22.

[72] *Ibid*, 4.

> Autumn – early autumn – can offer the best Auckland weather, with that windowpane brightness and cleanness of air and light that belong to Wellington and the South Island, but with the mildness that belongs to the North. It is, for that season only, mildness without a blurring of edges. The blade is sharp, the water sparkles, the far hills have precise lines and don't melt into one another, and the mind is fresh and alert.[73]

This setting – both time and place, obsessively rehearsed – is the real concern of the novel. The two interlocking forces that govern the novel are space and memory. Not as analytic matter to be debated or essayed upon, but as dynamic and continuous forces which move and shape. When *All Visitors Ashore* is called 'metafictional' this is what is meant, an awareness of the way the world shapes art as art shapes the world; and is put best by Lawrence Jones: where the English readers of the novel would see 'only' metafiction, the New Zealand reader would find 'another dimension, indicated by the dedication 'To Whom it may concern', for the 'fiction' obviously 'concerns' Frame, Sargeson, and Stead, among others. It is a conflation of Stead's own experiences in relation to Frame and Sargeson in 1954, and in the Waterfront dispute of 1951….Fact and fiction weave in and out in a wonderous manner which becomes its own justification.'[74] This is well put, though I would amend it slightly: contextual facts around creation – figures in 'real' life, events in 'real' history – become like the landscape itself, the shape is there in the world, you can see it, but when rendered in prose it becomes fiction. The rendition of physical space in novels co-exists strangely with words like 'fact' and 'fiction', it seems to challenge the natural conception of the two as binaries: if one describes Takapuna, or Rangitoto, or indeed Connecticut, in a novel, then the matter of the world might remain unchanged as it becomes art – though of course something has changed, now it is art.

---

[73] *Ibid*, 70.

[74] Lawrence Jones, 'The Novel,' in *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English*, ed. Terry Strum (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1998): 199.

The figures of the novel and the figures of Auckland's mid-century literary scene swirl in almost real Auckland, with characters chiming with reality, just similar enough to engage in a kind of mythologisation. Cecilia Skyways has red hair and some sort of undefined neurological difficulties and lives in the shed of an older artist in Takapuna, just as Janet Frame did. Melior Farbro lives a kind of subsistence lifestyle on Takapuna beach and houses artists in his shed, he's homosexual, he grows vegetables, he mentors younger writers, just like Frank Sargeson. Curl Skidmore, too, is a kind of Stead-like figure, young and ambitious and has a partner (though Stead was married), writes poetry and is determined to write novels, and later he leaves the country, he returns, he becomes a professor, and he writes *this* novel. The intersection, the metafictional trick, is of course in these lives intersecting at the point of writing the novel *All Visitors Ashore*. It exists too in a trick Stead employs frequently in his fiction of the eighties and nineties (along with Janet Frame, who does similar in *Living in The Maniototo*) – the swirling and changing of, and playing with, nomenclature. There are plenty of variations on the protagonist-narrator's name: Scamper, Skinflint, Skillsaw, Urlich Ambrose, 'Early (though he's usually late)…Curl (though his hair is as waveless as a dam in summer)', Gurr-l, earlybird, Curlyboy, Oilrich, Ambrosia.[75] This happens, though with fewer extremes, with other characters – Pat is Pat Bennet, and Patagonia, but also Aowera; Cecilia Skyways is Dawn Clegg; Melior Farbro is Melvin Heap. And yet James K Baxter is, simply, Jim Baxter – we're drawn back to this strange shimmering zone between the world outside and the made-up world. Baxter is comically and not inaccurately portrayed drunk and lurching, seemingly the 'real' Baxter thrown in with these unstable fictional avatars.

[75] Judity Dell Panny, *Plume of bees: a literary biography of C.K. Stead (*Auckland: Cape Catley, 2009), 45.

Instability is the point. A firm name can suggest a firm being, a person to be understood, a text to be unlocked, a memory to be retrieved. But dreams, memories, names, are inherently unstable. The mixing up of names and nicknames, their askance relation to the 'real' gestures towards a kind of deconstruction – Derrida's answer to Shakespeare's question: whatever is in a name is certainly not 'the essential of their bearers'.[76] And yet a name becomes inescapable – Romeo has nothing else to call his Juliet, even after the renunciation of their names, they die, in effect on their account. Nothing so maudlin here, of course, but the point remains, Curl, or Urlich, or Curlboy, or Skidmore, is left unstable – the 'essential' of his being seeming to exist outside of his given name (and all the names Stead gives him to give to himself as narrator). And yet a fully deconstructive point seems wrong – Stead is not challenging the *capacity* of the signifier to relate to raw reality, his work often seems an aggressive rebuke of just that sort of thinking[77] – rather the nomenclature, its breakdowns and reformations, seems to link back to this notion of a 'dreamtime', to the past as a kind of haze of associations.

This haze of personal identity links back to the odd structureless sense of the novel. Action occurs, the plot is stable and uncomplicated: a bohemian beach community, a series of departures beginning with Jim and June, Skidmore rejecting Cecilia Skyways, Farbro's at once paternal and homoerotic attraction to Kenny, Kenny and the strikes (chiefly as background), Skidmore caught with Felicia (when he should be waving Cecilia off), Patagonia pregnant, the events of the abortion, the blood-soaked towel, Patagonia off on the ship, Skidmore waving the

[76] Arleen Ionescu, 'Pas-de-noms/Plus de noms. Derrida and Blanchot,' *Word and Text A Journal of Literary Studies and Linguistics* 1, no. 1 (2011): 61.

[77] Aside from his open condemnation of Derrida 'my enemy', in the titular poem in the collection: C.K. Stead, *That Derrida Whom I Derided Died* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2018), 125. Not to mention his repeated evocations of 'reality', see Introduction: 'Beauty existed; it was not just an idea, or a subjective and personal preference, but a human fact, an aspect of "reality".' C.K. Stead, *You Have a Lot to Lose*, 232.

towel – 'did she see?'. And yet all this is fuzzed and hazed, cast with an amber light – not the clear light of Stead's Auckland autumn, a humid summer light. And of course, in a fictive reconstruction from memory, a series of eddies around moments – those towels, red or checked, bookending the novel – what forms all of this for the reader is *voice*. This whole world is soaped over in the narrative voice, all that nostalgia but all that gentle teasing too, undercutting the nostalgia, highlighting the selectiveness, the way the self sets the tone of the past – Jones claims this undercutting is done through highlighting 'arbitrariness and literariness', but this strikes me as wrong. What is undercut is reliability – but we know that anyway, every voice (and this novel jumps into constructed points-of-view of various characters for short moments) is our narrator's voice; that mellifluous doubting, figure, part saccharine nostalgic, part wise with eyebrow raised, judging himself (and judging himself judging himself). And the form this particular voice-oriented, slightly unstable, narrating takes is again a kind of analogy with the psychotherapist's couch – the space here is not 'real', on two levels, not only is it fiction, but we watch the memories form, we watch Curl interrogate his own recollections, imagine the lives of others, through empathy and cynicism he projects a world more complex and more ambiguous than mere events – he casts his mind to Pat, he casts his mind to Skyways. These are leaps into the 'as if' inside the larger 'as if' of the novel, and the search is, again like analysand, for a narrative that might tie them together, might defeat incoherence and bestow not only rational order, and not only *understanding*, but also *significance* – these moments, imagined and made up, must *mean something*. And its through these kinds of leaps – into minds Skidmore cannot know, that the process of self-narration becomes the drama of the story itself.

Take two examples, as Skidmore tries to comprehend the inner lives of the others around him, first Pat:

> Up there sits the impenetrable Pat Bennet, her puzzle, wrapped in dark shiny hair and olive skin, insoluble even to herself. For three days she has worked at her assignment, locked in one of her selves, the deepest, the innermost box of her, which is neither Maori nor French and might contain ice or fire but does not express itself in the ordinary language of civility and affection. It might be the Celt in her, and it comes out in long silences and short angers, and through the tip of her pencil on to the pages of the sketchbook. To put it more simply in the language Nathan Stockman applies to her from a genial distance, Pat (he thinks of her as Patagonia) is working well and while she's in the vein she shouldn't be disturbed.[78]

Curl trying gingerly to find ethnic rubrics for understanding the other – not the racial other necessarily, the other as anyone outside of the self, but ethnicity becomes a heuristic *for* otherness, here. A cynical reader might argue this is a kind of orientalising, but this is not quite right, rather it is failure of understanding, aestheticized there on the page. Pat, Patagonia, Aowera: unreadable, obscure, elliptical, other; metaphorical, or analogic, never really the thing-in-itself. Like Anne Frank in *The Ghost* Writer, ephemeral Pat is a figure upon which Skidmore projects, a transferential figure, whose real lived humanity keeps slipping through the grasp of his closing fingers. Who eludes him precisely because *he constructs her.* Telling too, the way this passage is flanked by evidence of Skidmore's state of mind; he sits down on the steps 'striking off brilliant images', then notices Pat – this passage, this riff, where the narrator and the protagonist's thoughts join, not reported from then, but felt now-as-then – knows not to disturb her, and *look* the mind wanders off to the stolen peanut butter.

Second, take the impressive stream-of-consciousness proper, projected, or constructed, into the mind of Cecilia Skyways. After Skidmore flees the hut and their near sexual encounter (everybody always wants Skidmore, in this novel), and now the spider in the web in the hut whom she conceives of as a kind of Zen master begins to

[78] C.K. Stead, *All Visitors Ashore*, 73.

speak, '…Bodhidharma of the Web has silently assumed the voice of the mother of Cecilia Skyways', and launches into an extended and incomplete rant:

> I told you I warned you but what's the use no one ever listens to me I don't know why I even care I don't know why I bother I tell a person a thing and do they listen no they don't know dreams I said don't build on it I said if it happens fine I said if it doesn't there's no skin off anyone's nose not yours not mind not his but do you take any notice do you listen no you don't you just go your own way you let things get out of proportion and then you wonder why you get hurt I don't know you drive me to distraction you really do what's the use of my trying to help it's just a waste of effort on my part I might as well save my breath to cool my porridge as my father used to say mind you in those days things were different and when an adult spoke we listened there was some respect then I can tell you and so there should be and if there wasn't our parents wanted to know the reason why anyway I blame myself I should have said no stay away from him he's not worth a time of fish […] I've worked my fingers to the bone for you and got very little thanks but it's not going to continue sooner or later the worm will turn you should have realised that I'm not going to make a doormat of myself for the pleasure of the likes of you my girl so let this be a warning to you and if you go near that Skidmore thing again I won't just stop your pocket money I'll get your father to tan the hide off of you so help me I will…[79]

The levels of projection here heap atop one-another: Skidmore the narrator reimagines a scene in which he was present, and then lingers and extends the moment, imagining the impact of his flight, that door slamming in the shed, he imagines that Cecilia imagines that spider as a kind of Zen master, and he imagines too that poor Cecilia is left anxious and nervous and her personal history is collapsing back on her – the voice of the New Zealand mother, the scold, rushing up from a past, from not-so-deep in the nervous writer's subconscious, bubbling up and ending with that all to endless ellipsis. That personal history, too, is a kind of generational one – the odd child is treated poorly, the odd woman is locked away (as was Frame herself), the kiwi father of

[79] *Ibid*, 78-79.

the nineteen fifties beats his children with abandon and impunity. These stream-of-consciousness sections become sorts of experiments, attempts to set up a little laboratory in prose and project at great speed into the experience of the other.

The final example then, and the centre point of what one might grandiosely call Skidmore's comic fall – when Pat catches Skidmore with his 'Curlcock splendidly entering [Felice] from behind'.[80] The sex scene is faintly bizarre, uncomfortable, over aestheticized in a way that never quite seems fully intentional, it reads *accidentally* comic – breasts 'hanging there', Felice's 'fingers moving in circles through the flowering bush', described as a 'Girl Guide salute' – but nonetheless, the visceral, the slightly silly, has its effect, and the image of 'two still brown eyes in a beautiful olive-skinned face watching you from the window' jolts the reader away from feeling uncomfortable about Stead's talentless erotica to feeling intensely uncomfortable for poor Pat, there at the window. And with this sex-scene, despite the competence of the prose stalling for a moment, we see something of the temporal perspective of the novel – as Felice calls to Skidmore from the window and 'the cover falls from one of her breasts', the narrative voice turns plural for a moment, choral: 'And now we are watching you Curl Skidmore' …. 'we are watching you across a vast gulf of thirty and more years.'[81] The choral voice is not here masking the singular person behind it but rather the divisions in the self as it peers back and builds up a memory again, grabbing at these images to make first a series of moments – breasts, oysters, entry from behind – and up into a plot, up into a structure that seems only by the nature of its telling a deterministic inevitability. Because, of course, once something is already passed it becomes a teleological inevitability – just as our present always feels as if it draws

[80] *Ibid*, 116.
[81] *Ibid*, 106-109

all the past towards us, the ultimate fiction. And so when Skidmore, years later, breaks out the solipsistic mode and into a hypothetical conversation of his own:

> What was it you felt, what was it you thought, at that moment, Patagonia? Urlich Skidmore throws the question into the dark night of the 1980s and hears back in the voice he remembers and would recognize anywhere even after a gap of so many decades, I. felt nothing, I wanted to die, I thought what a good fuck, I felt hate, I felt love, I felt cold, I felt hot, I thought why haven't *we* done that, I thought what a big cock he's got, I thought so that's why he didn't wave the towel, I thought is it too late to do the shopping, I felt jealousy, I felt indifference, I felt embarrassment, I felt disgust, I felt tired of feeling, I thought Felice's bum is beautiful, I thought I will paint them, I thought it will be better than my seawall picture, and what I thought and felt I don't remember and if I did I wouldn't tell you so it's your business now Mr Whatsit (I've forgotten your name) since it's you who is writing this book and haven't you got an imagination that will fill in the gaps?[82]

The spinning remains, the energy, that vortex, with questions and sensations piling up – the author fictionalising the fictionless, structureless noise of reality. What does a person think, seeing something like that? Any number of various minor jolts, any number of neurons firing; only here in the writing is there any coherence. So when Skidmore attempts to give up his perspective – of course he cannot, and his fictionalised interlocutor lays this out. Without the art, it's all just mess.

The dancing about the edges of the mess – voice overlaying all those details, shaping them – is why I say the novel can feel structureless. A voice defined by place and time, but piecing together a self, grasping at a story – does the loss of the relationship cause Skidmore to write this novel? Does the cheating end the relationship, or cause the abortion? Causality is lost in the mists of memory and time,

[82] *Ibid*, 116-117.

and all that remains are symbols and figures. The structure is not analogue, causal, but hooked to images and moments. Rangitoto, tea towels, water (and blood), food and sex, oysters, fish, vegetables, are wherein coherence, such as it is, lies. Not names, dates, places, the history of big men. This is why these *plot points* so often feel more like riffs – Stead claims to have written the novel in a near continuous outpouring of energy, and this seems to be baked into the text.[83] This goes back to social history, to the 'nameless, faceless' masses, who are in life as in fiction the actors and not the backdrop – geography and art conspire to make the little people not extras, but to make them *everything* – solipsists find undying homes in voice-novels like *All Visitors Ashore*.

The mirror reflects. The analyst and patient reconstruct. But mirrors like memories distort. The present and past are inextricable – they each form the architecture of the other. When Philip Roth names his novel 'The Ghost Writer' something of distortion and reflection is already divined before the reader opens the text – and falling through all those broken fictional floorboards one comprehends in the title a kind of question, a kind of challenge. A ghost writer is a professional writing under another's name, a kind of fraudulent enterprise (the conman's confessions, the businessman's *Bildungsroman,* the pornstar's pilgrimage); Anne Frank in the novel becomes a kind of living-ghost, the writer with a new name, just as out here, in the real world, Anne Frank's ghost remains hovering over the diary, the record of a young girl lost to history and resurrected (but not fully, never fully) in her own pages; and Zuckerman is summoning up from the very first sentence these ghosts of the past. And of course Roth himself is writing as another writer, Zuckerman, giving his words and thoughts to a narrator

[83] C.K. Stead, *You Have A Lot To Lose*, 346.

who does not bear his name. So the question, the challenge is: *who are the ghosts?* And this is the ultimate convergence of *The Ghost* Writer and *All Visitors* Ashore: every writer is a ghost writer, words given to others who exist in half-lives. And while we wander sonambulistically through the shifting present we leave ghosts of ourselves in the past, re-treading steps already distorted.

These are novels of simultaneous construction and re-construction. Novels that make their own ghosts. In Stead's vulnerable present tense, in the temporal ambiguity of the novel and its all-consuming voice is a sense of a world existing only in motion, a delicate verbal object in endless motion – a glass spinning top, brittle and beautiful and always on the move, to stop it would be to divorce the object from its essence – hence the blur of plot, the blur of action, like the past these are ghosts, wandering in their circles, the precision of their experiences dulls to distortion even as they're created. *The Ghost Writer* too, is about the distortions of creation, about the impact that self has on making and remembering – making it all a kind of fiction – Roth makes Stead's point by other means, that the little figures of history are also the reality of history and are never really graspable. Both novels, mid-career novels leering back at youth, are metafictions in service of realism – the complicated realism of the self, with all its lies and doubles, all its forgettings and remakings – the complicated reality of ghosts and writers. The experience of this reality is lyrical and, in its way, very sad: shadows beyond our grasp, played out before the reader, and as we experience them the reality of the novels takes primacy and one is left in mind of that arch-constructionist and enemy of analysis, Vladimir Nabokov, summoning up the past in *Speak, Memory*:

> 'I see again my schoolroom in Vyra, the blue roses of the wallpaper, the leathern couch where my uncle sits, gloating over a tattered book. A sense of security, of well-being, of summer warmth pervades my memory. That robust reality makes a ghost

> of the present. The mirror brims with brightness; a bumblebee has entered the room and bumps against the ceiling. Everything is as it should be, nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die.'[84]

And these words play as a kind of spell: fiction gives its figures a kind of immortality and shunts the outside into a kind of half-life. Ghosts are everywhere.

Chapter Two

The Shattering, the Shuffling: Manuscripts in Roth and Stead's Novels of Incoherence, *The Counterlife* and *The End of the Century at the End of the World*

Look closely at your perfect portrait, look past the eyes and closer still. Look close enough and you see all cracks and flecks. You see the reality of the crumbling, the entropy and chaos and decay. Look at *The Man with The Golden Helmet*, those sad creased eyes full of old and tired life, but step closer and the mess creeps in. Reality is not the artist's finely wrought impression of the real – those eyes, that man – but the naked chaos of organic colours dried near deadness. Get close enough and the cracks are all you see. And like this even the most gilded fiction

[84] Vladimir Nabakov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (London: Penguin, 1969), 52.

from the most careful stylish and omnipotent author – who sits somewhere close to god on earth – is replete with 'hairline cracks'.[85] The messy scandal of reality beyond realism. The incoherence of a shifting world, that concomitance of random phantasmagorical images and a groping in the dark. In *The Counterlife* and in *The End of the Century at the End of the World*, Roth and Stead strung novels not from gilding and finery but from hairline cracks. Chaos novels, life novels, death novels.

Where these novels link is not in abstruse theory – though the epistemics of the self and the text are always in play – as much of the criticism on *The Counterlife* suggests, but in the pragmatic realities of fiction writing. My contention is that the two come upon their metafictional structures mimetically, through a commitment to realism, the realism of writers and their flawed creations.

In five altering turns, chapters that exist as discrete episodes but build upon and contradict one-another, *The Counterlife* pushes the hypothetical method Roth developed in earlier work – *The Ghost Writer*'s central fantasy of Anne Frank, Kafka's imaginary afterlife in 'I Always Wanted you to Admire My Fasting' – from an aspect of story to its unifying principle and its operating logic. A tale of two brothers linked by life and death, opening in a typically Rothian manner with a premise that might belong in a sitcom or a stand-up routine, and then

[85] John Banville 'A Master of Hidden Things.' *New York Review of Books*, 24 October, 2019, accessed 28 July 2021, https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/10/24/elizabeth-bowen-master-hidden-things/

nosedives like a crashing plane. First as comedy, then as tragedy. The sitcom pitch might run thus: a man is prescribed beta-blockers preventing catastrophic heart failure but causing profound erectile dysfunction; the man opts to undergo dangerous voluntary surgery in the hopes that he can both save his life and maintain his erections; the man dies. And this trajectory – the premise, the explosion, the nosedive – a sitcom that trips into a blackhole is repeated, expanded, and varied across five chapters.

The End of The Century at The of The World (hereafter *The End*) makes an aesthetic of writer's block, of stalled decisions, of blank pages, of faltering starts. In radical contrast to *All Visitor's Ashore* in both composition and style, where the earlier novel is a kind of ebullient whirlwind written apparently continuously, the later is composed of seven halting chapters set in the early seventies and the early nineteen nineties in Auckland. Each is composed of a series of elements cobbled together – *mise en abyme* autobiography, passages voiced in third and first person changing within sections, dream sequences, even television transcripts. And while questions about the past's impact on the present and the way they create one another animate this novel too, it no longer strikes one as a mad celebration but a complex mapping. Laura Jackson, the protagonist and some-time narrator of the novel (and its implied author), is working on a doctorate on the fictional New Zealand writer Hilda Tapler. Professor Stead the scholar of modernism is well aware of the doctoral student's dilemma: the writer's block, the blank

page, the self-doubt. Laura Jackson is not only a scholar but a nascent writer who finds the call of fiction – the imaginative leaps it allows, the investigations that open themselves up to the imagination beyond the world of verified footnotes and documentary trails. Laura, in the course of her investigations, becomes convinced that a fragment written by Hilda Tapler suggesting that Katherine Mansfield faked her own death and moved home to New Zealand, is in fact real. Her supervisor – a poststructuralist with a name reminiscent of the author's – is determined she treat the piece as fiction. What results, amongst the personal crises and textual interconnections and temporal skipping, is a tension between 'fact' and 'fiction' and a blurring of those supposedly hermetic categories. The oscillations and the questioning and faltering is both an aesthetic choice and is totally inherent to the organising persona of the implied author, who at the end of the novel begins her own with the same introduction found in the second paragraph of this novel: 'My name is Laura Vine Barber, 26 Rangiview Crescent, Eastern Bays, Auckland.'[86] So the book of fact and fiction that seeks to treat fact fictionally, that moves from academia towards art and merges the two, is really fiction from the start. Hairline cracks – a shattered image, a recursive and unstable loop in the modernist mode.

Any rational examination of a life or an episode, or even a single event in a life, has to reckon with all the layered contradictions, all the

[86] C.K. Stead, *The End of The Century At The End of The World*, 9 and 220.

confusions, that build into any given point. But unlike life – lives like plays exist only in their doing, only in the moments of their experience – novels are also *composed*. Our use of the noun 'composition' to indicate a serious literary effort seems to signal not only its relation to a kind of music but to its having been built, put together. The curious life-like attribute of novels is in the verb *composing* too, in seeing action being done on the page. Stead says life and novels are alike – in their basic structure of beginning and middle and end, as well as their recursive loops, their repetition – and novels like life exist right there in front of you. In both of these books, what happens in front of the reader are novels defined by a writer's notebook aesthetic, a sense of the annotated page or the scratched-out line: that garden of forking paths dividing before the unsteady pen, before the blankness of the page.

Yet the shifting before the blankness, the unstable world of possibilities, is balanced by a kind of commitment to reality – to creating parts which operate in and of themselves as realist storytelling. Beads along a chain, each a mimetically representative unit unto itself, building to a whole that attempts to capture the inherent confusion, the mess of fictional reality. The abiding sentiment of this note-book aesthetic is not so much a trick, a tactic to undermine fiction, but an attempt to acknowledge a reality spotted by Montaigne almost five hundred years ago:

> We are all patchwork, and so shapeless and diverse in composition that each bit, each moment, plays its own game.[87]

The patchwork constitution of *The Counterlife* is best divided along its five constituent parts, each existing as a story unto itself, and yet destabilising and twisting our understanding of the others; a twitch of the thread. The dual and alternating protagonists of each part are Nathan and Henry Zuckerman: the most persistent of Roth's alter egos and the subject of all three novels I am considering, and his brother a New Jersian dentist. Each section is geographical, Basel (a city in Switzerland, Maria's hometown), Judea (the anachronistic name for Israel, the Jewish homeland), Aloft (aboard the El Al flight out of Tel Aviv), Gloucestershire (a county in England), and finally Christendom (a generic and anachronistic term for the Christian west, in this case as opposed to Judea). Like the chapters themselves these locations are not only real places, some construed broadly and some specific, they are also dream kingdoms, psychic spaces.

Without going into the blow by blow, for which there is not nearly the room here, it makes sense to chart the cascading uncertainties of the novel. 'Basel' opens with italicisation – with dense detail, with raw facts. The italics and the detail together suggest the primary document, the case notes, the author's notes too (these come again, later), the gathering and organisation of information before it becomes a novel.

[87] Michel De Montaigne, 'On The Inconsistency of Our Actions', in *The Complete Works*

This is the novel: the becoming of the novel, notes, hypotheses, inventions, abstractions, subconscious twangs that play on story. The generation of narrative: the on-going past is already there ('Ever since', 'had been'), but it presents a formal kind of voice, and is presented as document in summary.[88] When the lengthy passage ends we see that it's the draft of a eulogy – '[n]eedless to say, these were not the three thousand words that Carol had been expecting when she'd phoned the evening before the funeral and, despite all that had driven the two brothers apart, asked if Zuckerman would deliver a eulogy' – though not a standard one, it moves on its own into a story. The story develops its own rules, its own boundaries (or is it merely fact?) – this creation and contradiction is the heartbeat of the novel.[89] The essence of the first death seems to be set out in this opening document, this draft:

> They experimented for six months, first with the dosage and, when that didn't work, with other brands of the drug, but nothing helped: he no longer awakened with his morning erection or had sufficient potency for intercourse with his wife, Carol, or with his assistant, Wendy, who was sure that it was she, and not the medication, that was responsible for the startling change. At the end of the day, with the outer-office door locked and the blinds down, she worked with all her finesse to arouse him, but work it was, hard labor for both of them, and when he told her it was no use and begged her to stop, had finally to pry open her jaws to make her stop, she was even more convinced that the fault was hers. One evening, when she had burst into tears and told him that she knew it was only a matter of time before he went out and found somebody new, Henry struck her across the face. If it had been the act of a rhino, of a wild man in an orgasmic frenzy, Wendy would have been characteristically accommodating; this, however, was a manifestation, not of ecstasy, but of utter exhaustion with her blindness. She didn't understand, the stupid

[88] Philip Roth, *The Counterlife*, 7.

[89] *Ibid*, 17.

> girl! But of course he didn't either, failed as yet to comprehend the confusion that this loss might elicit in somebody who happened to adore him.
>
> Immediately afterwards he was overcome with remorse. Holding her to him, he assured Wendy, who was still weeping, that she was virtually all he thought about now every day – indeed (though he could not say as much) if Wendy would only let him find work for her in another dental office, he wouldn't have to be reminded every five minutes of what he could no longer have. There were still moments during office hours when he surreptitiously caressed her or watched the old yearning as she moved about in her formfitting white tunic and trousers, but then he remembered his little pink heart pills and was plummeted into despair. Soon Henry began to have the most demonic fantasies of the adoring young woman who would have done anything to restore his potency being overwhelmed before his eyes, by three, four, and five other men.[90]

This of course is revealed to be in the Rothian hypothetical mode; and the question begged by *The Counterlife* is what, in this novel, in fiction, is not in a hypothetical mode? The voice is classic Zuckerman in tragi-comic style, this reality as comedy. We die for silly things, we get bent out of shape over the most ridiculous occurrences – sex and jealousy, the useless male appendage. These are stupid things, but all important too. That distinction is funny – making them literally life and death, tragedy operating as farce. But the stakes are real. They become very real for Wendy, the victim of domestic abuse. They become real for the hysterical Henry, driven by this Freudian madness to in effect kill himself with risky elective surgery.

Much of this is conjecture, although convincing and lively conjecture, from the author Zuckerman. This mode is in itself

[90] *Ibid*, 8-9.

comprehensible to the reader; not yet wildly complex, it comprises a straightforward close third narrative with documentary sections spliced in. We return to Nathan's voice briefly in his notes on Maria, short detours contextualising Carol's (the widow's) bowdlerising eulogy. These are the notes of the writer mining life for material, that vampire again:

> H. at midnight "I have to phone somebody. I have to tell somebody that I love her. Do you mind – at this hour?" "No. Go ahead." "I at least have you to tell. She has nobody. I'm bursting to tell everyone. I'm actually dying to tell Carol. I want her to know how terrifically happy I am." "She can live without it."[91]

And rounding off the chapter savagely, with Carol picking Henry up from the airport:

> …Carol, all at once in tears, undoes her alpaca-lined storm coat and flips on the car light. Naked beneath but for black bra, panties, stockings, garter belt. For a flickering moment he is even aroused, but then he spots the price tag stapled to the garter belt, and sees in that all the desperateness of this startling display. What he sees is not some wealth of passion in Carol, undiscovered by him till then, that he might suddenly begin to plumb, but the pathos of these purchases obviously made earlier that day by the predictable, sexually unadventurous wife to whom he would be married for the rest of his life. Her desperation left him limp – then angry: never had he ached more for Maria! How could he have let that woman go! "Fuck me!" Carol cries, and not in the incomprehensible Swiss-German that used to make him so excited, but in plain, understandable English. "Fuck me before I die! You haven't fucked me like a woman in years!"[92]

The rush, the desperation, parallels the scenes between Hope and E.I Lonoff in *The Ghost Writer*. To some degree, certainly, a trope in Roth's fiction – the desperate wife, the shrill scold. A presentation of wives that has justly come into public discussion, especially in the wake of

[91] *Ibid*, 27-28.

[92] *Ibid*, 52-53.

Blake Bailey's biography of the writer, presenting dissatisfied wives as 'harridans, millstones, neurasthenic bores.'[93] Without engaging in the contemporary zeal for flavouring literary criticism with the faults of the writer's personal moral life, two notes: first that this motif exists both in Roth's descriptions of wives and girlfriends to his biographer as well as in his fiction, and second that in the fiction at least the characterisation leaps out beyond the supposed limitations of the man himself. Carol in this passage is desperate, pathetic, wheedling and sad, but the moral brunt falls not on her – this dutiful and loving wife and mother, this intelligent woman – but on Henry's libidinous dissatisfaction, his moral failing. What the fiction does here is not lampoon Carol and sympathise with Henry – this pathetically priapic, self-justifying adulterer and (let us not forget) casual domestic abuser – who sits somewhere between monster and moron, but to see the grubby, the pathetic, and the self-justifying that exists in everyone as they jostle to create and control their own stories.

'Basel' taken alone exists as a maximalist short story, an excerpt one could imagine in the pages of the New Yorker. But the twitching thread is revealed as we skip from one part to the next, and suddenly death is not stable and time folds in on itself. In 'Judea' Henry is seemingly resurrected and his death reversed; his existential crisis looms only larger and depression sets in even after the success of the

[93] Stephen Metcalf, 'If *Philip Roth: The Biography* Leaves You Hating Its Subject, Thank Blake Bailey.' *Los Angeles Times*, 2 April 2021, accessed 28 July, 2021, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/books/story/2021-04-02/philip-roth-biography-review-blake-bailey-exposed-him.

surgery. 'Though his physical rehabilitation had by then been successfully completed, at home after work he was succumbing still to fits of terrible despair, and many nights would drag himself away from the dinner table midway through the family meal to fall asleep on the couch in the study.'[94] This depression, this mid-life crisis spins out into an ideological and physical adventure, an escape from daily life. The novel reboots as it were, in some sense it actually achieves the goal of the midlife crisis in the very text of the novel itself; a radical shift in direction and a transformation of setting, excitement sought and won. Though not a sports car here, no. A dramatic change and a search not only for excitement but for authenticity, for a truer realer Judaism; Henry moves to the Israeli settlement of 'Agor'.

Karen Grumberg identifies a concern with pastoralism, which she construes not as a genre (not sheep and crook and hut on an Arcadian hill in halcyon twilight) but a mode of discourse.[95] A discourse which concerns itself with escape, a 'retreat' into a kind of soothing unreality, a unitary and homely discourse defeating the fracturing of reality. The argument so goes that 'exilic wounds' and associated humiliations, often represented in *The Counterlife* as sexual ones, namely impotence, are best avoided through a welding of the self to Israel. The homeland is no longer imaginary but total, real, political and coherent. Grumberg's sense of the intellectual paradigm of *The Counterlife* is

[94] Philip Roth, *The Counterlife*, 61-62.

[95] Karen Grumberg, 'Necessary Wounds and the Humiliation of Galut in Roth's The Counterlife and Operation Shylock,' *Philip Roth Studies* 5, no 1 (2009): 37.

essentially one that juxtaposes diaspora and pastoralism, settling on diaspora as the fundamental and 'authentic' Jewish state. In its fragments, in its humiliations (summed up by impotence), the diaspora is, according to Grumberg, the quintessential Jewish state.[96] The problem with this view of the novel is that it sidelines the totality of the text into a kind of fictionalised essay, a didactic statement on the nature of Jewish identity. This relegates the novel in the way didactic readings always do: into a political statement. It utterly ignores the specifics of the novel Grumberg herself outlines (and then seems to forget):

> Different sections of the novel represent different "counterlives" and alternative permutations of the same scenario, in which one brother must decide whether to risk his life and have an unnecessary cardiac surgery so as to regain sexual potency, or to live with the impotence brought on by cardiac medication. This operation constitutes the core of the various counter-narratives of the novel.[97]

This is an excellent attempt at summarising the vacillating nature of *The Counterlife*, and yet ignores the specifics thereafter. The novel does not concern *Judaism at large*. It does not attempt to deliver a thesis statement about the lived reality of all Jewish life. Indeed to whom would such a novel apply? Eastern European Jewry? The Hasidic inhabitants of Islington? Rather it concerns the specific psychic and personal reality of Nathan Zuckerman: his various readings in various realities of his brother Henry, 'the most elemental connection I have'[98],

---

[96] *Ibid*, 54.

[97] *Ibid*, 41.

[98] Philip Roth, *The Counterlife*, 84.

of impotence, of 'Maria' (variously construed). This is not a story in search of a political statement, and Grumberg makes a mistake that is very easy with Philip Roth, whose novels are often voiced in the rant, the opinion, the essayistic detour, all verbal momentum and spilled feeling. The better focus of the tension between 'pastoralism' and 'diaspora' is perhaps reality and escape and fantasy – how these hands pull the mind, the life, in confused directions of their own.

More accurate than forcing the novel into a tract exclusively about Jewish identity – about an assertion of 'authenticity' that Roth never makes – it seems the form and shape of the novel sits closer to the manuscript, to the nascent novel, the foetal novel, the text vibrating just before final creation. I have already mentioned that Roth kept a photograph of Franz Kafka above his writing desk, already mentioned his fantasy-criticism-story about the afterlife (indeed, the counterlife) of Franz Kafka. The novel here is the opposite of a statement of authenticity, or even authenticity-as-fracture. It's an opening up of possible fictive scenarios, a concretising of potential drafts into units that work (that play their own game) but are not yet a cohesive whole. The model is perhaps Kafka's unfinished novels – famously compiled not by himself but by his executor Max Brod, who imposed upon unitary chapters an order and direction, an overall (perhaps 'meta' if we take the parts as units) narrative line. It seems the best way to read *The Counterlife* is in this mode, as options written down in an unfinished manuscript, chapters one might shuffle and present in any order. One

could easily switch them around, I think, without ruining the effect of the novel. The confusion that critics who read Roth too didactically run into seems to me to come from the manifesto-like urgency and intensity of the writing. Take the intersection of Nathan and Henry in 'Judea':

> From the moment that we started along the path that sloped down the hill toward the two long unpaved streets that constituted Agor's residential quarter. Henry began making it clear that we weren't going to sit in the shade somewhere having a deep discussion about whether or not *he'd* done the right thing by seizing the opportunity to return to Zion. He was now nothing like as friendly as he'd seemed when I'd showed up in front of his class. Instead, as soon as we two were alone, he immediately turned querulous. He had no intention, he told me, of being reproved by me and wouldn't tolerate any attempt to investigate or challenge his motives. He'd talk about Agor, if I wanted to know what this place stood for, he'd talk about the settlement movement, its roots and ideology and what the settlers were determined to achieve, he'd talk about the changes in the country since Begin's coalition had taken charge, but as for the American-style psychiatric soul-searching in which my own heroes could wallow for pages on end, that was a form of exhibitionistic indulgence and childish self-dramatization that blessedly belonged to the "narcissistic past." The old life of non-historical personal problems seemed to him now embarrassingly, disgustingly, unspeakably puny.
>
> Telling me all this, he had worked up more emotion than anything I'd said could possibly have inspired, especially as I had as yet said nothing. It was one of those speeches that people spend hours preparing and delivering while lying in bed unable to sleep. The smiles up at the ulpan had been for the crowd. This was the distrustful fellow I'd talked to on the phone the night before.
>
> "Fine," I said. "No psychiatry."
>
> Still on the offense, he said, "And don't condescend to me."
>
> "Well, don't knock my wallowing heroes…"[99]

The thrust, as often in Roth, is more a seesaw. Who bears the brunt of the critique? Is Henry, the man who indeed sprinted away from his wife

[99] *Ibid*, 108-109.

and transformed from suburban dentist to wild zealot, or Nathan, the self-absorbed, self-pitying writer of psychiatric self-absorption and self-pity, the object of critique? This is of course an unfair question, the novel is not running a critique, nor modelling a life *done right*, but throwing into realistic revelation the quirks and inconsistencies of both. Is 'American-style psychiatric soul-searching' not a near perfect description of a Rothian hero, or a Zuckerman character, or Zuckerman himself? And of course there's a delicious irony in Henry's anger, his defensiveness, without sufficient self-obsession and soul-searching he would not have left his wife and children for the sake of an ideological adventure in Israel, an adventure which is after all a kind of auto-therapy for depression and angst. Henry can be angry with Zuckerman all he likes, Henry can rebel, but in that overwhelming first-person in which the majority of the novel is told he will be forever trapped. Henry is one of Zuckerman's wallowing protagonists and no matter the change in circumstance, the change in fate, his status as character is the unbreakable chain, the bond unsevered.

The internalised contradictions of the character not quite aware of his own status, the ironies and traps, do not reduce the impact of the setting; the shift for the very first time in Roth's work to Israel seems to heighten the stakes. As Paul Levy has it, 'his speculations on the existential nature of the self and on the meaning of his Jewish identity take on broader and graver implications as they are projected against the backdrop of Israel, that historically and emotionally charged

territory'.[100] Each chapter presents alternate modes of Jewishness, not merely diaspora-versus-homeland, but the Jewish experience as: middle-class and suburban, ideological, fanatical, victimised by casual anti-Semitism (the insider-outsider of Nathan Zuckerman's English experience). These permutations are made particularly dramatic in the closely linked second and third chapters, 'Judea' and 'Aloft'.

In 'Aloft', apparently continuing straight on from 'Judea' (note this is the only seemingly straightforward development from chapter to chapter), Nathan again encounters Jimmy Ben-Joseph, the moderately demented fan he met at the wailing-wall. Nathan observes, part way through their first meeting:

> I still couldn't tell whether he was half-crazy or completely crazy or just seething with energy, a manicky kid far away from home clowning around and having a good time. But since I was beginning to suspect that he might be a little of all three, I started back toward the low stone barrier and the table where I'd picked up my yarmulke. Beyond a gate across the square I could see several taxis waiting. I'd catch one back to the hotel. Intriguing as people like Jimmy can sometimes be, you usually get the best of them in the first three minutes. I've attracted them before.[101]

The frenetic intensity of this young man is not only evident to Zuckerman; his sense that he has already gotten the 'best' of him is reflected in the reader's experience too. Young, yappy, like Portnoy without the intelligence, Ben-Joseph is a tiresome character, a rant artist and weirdo who is promptly forgotten as the more dramatic and

---

[100] Paul Levy, 'The Text as Homeland: A Reading of Philip Roth's "The Counterlife" and "Operation Shylock", *Studies in American Jewish Literature (1981-)*vol 21 (2002): 61.
[101] Philip Roth, *The Counterlife*, 96.

more scenic world of Israel and Henry and Agor come to life. Compared to observations with the lilting power of an incantation, the yammering excitement of that young man at the wailing wall, that all American and somehow all Jewish kid (that paradox is essential), fades into dullness:

> 'Strange to find the second-born son, whose sustaining passion was always to be the equal of those already grown up, back in school at the age of forty. Even stranger to come upon his classroom atop a hill from which you could see off to the Dead Sea, and beyond that to creviced mountains of a desert kingdom.'[102]

And by the time Henry and Nathan part for the second time, not parted by death, but by geography and politics and what constitutes their private realities – 'What matters isn't Momma and Poppa and the kitchen table, it isn't *any* of that crap you write about – *it's who runs Judea!*' – the strange young man is all but forgotten.[103] This struggle with the self: Henry and Nathan as near gothic doubles, returning to that struggle not only between the brothers and their priorities but the struggle *within* this novel. That searching by the writer to figure out direction: to depart into a violent and political world, to view the kitchen table, the emotional psychodrama of family life. Then as the plane takes off and we enter that purgatorial zone of airline travel – stale food and recycled air and waiting, waiting – for this chapter the novel takes a unique sort of turn. Again an almost self-contained piece, again hurtling the novel along a new forking path, but the change this time (and only this time) is not in the positioning of the brothers and

[102] *Ibid*, 101.
[103] *Ibid*, 144.

Maria and life and death, but from a tension between personal and political into the more intensely political. The direction seems to cohere around these very real tensions associated with Israel, politics, serious violence. Next to Nathan sits a pious young man, sweating underneath a broad-brimmed hat with a long beard. The curiously recognisable young man is of course Ben-Joseph, in disguise, a near parody as Nathan observes looking at the young man 'the archetypal Jewish cast of an Israeli face would remind me of somebody back in America who could have been a close relative if not the very same Jew in a new incarnation.'[104] The plot here transforms into a thriller, and there is perhaps an argument that Roth may have had in him a kind of alternate career in hyper-intellectualised political thrillers. The young Ben-Joseph reveals himself, his hysterical fan-obsession with Nathan, and in time his gun and his grenade and his demented symbolic plan:

> What happens to me doesn't *matter*, Nathan. How can I care about myself when I have penetrated to the core of *the last Jewish problem?* We are torturing ourselves with memories! With masochism! And torturing goyisch mankind! The key to Israel's survival is no more Yad Vashems! No more Remembrance Halls of the Holocaust! Now what we have to suffer *is the loss of our suffering*! Otherwise, Nathan – and here is my prophecy as written in the Five Books of Jimmy – otherwise they will annihilate the State of Israel *in order to annihilate its Jewish conscience*! We have reminded them enough, we have reminded *ourselves* enough – *we must forget*![105]

Yet this mad terrorist plot, in which Ben-Joseph intends to make a symbolic point, precisely seems of no real concern. It is mixed

[104] *Ibid*, 159.

[105] *Ibid*, 170.

constantly with levels of textual awareness – he refers to the stage, to comedy routines (he calls Zuckerman and Menachem Begin, the former Israeli Prime Minister, the 'Diaspora Abbott and Israeli Costello'), to props and to 'improv' – and with Zuckerman's own commentary. On seeing the handgun he remarks: 'It was the pistol, Henry's first-act-pistol. This then must be the third act in which it is fired. "Forget Remembering" is the title of the play and the assassin is the self-appointed son who learned all he knows at my great feet. Farce is the genre, climaxing in blood.'[106] The climactic blood here is Ben-Joseph's, airline security find and beat him badly, they beat (and rectally examine – more male sexual humiliation) Zuckerman too when they find him with the gun. From here the confusion and risks spin out as a nightmare, in some way presaging the intensities of post-9/11 travel security. Jimmy Ben-Josephs, in a beaten delirium either in an attempt to transfer blame or merely out of genuine insanity and confusion, insists that Zuckerman is his father ('I am no such thing' terrified Nathan responds), insists the words of the manifesto are his.[107] The plane turns, with characters unaware, back to Israel. The airline thug begins a lecture on T. S. Eliot. The rant about Eliot serves as a counter-argument to Ben-Joseph's screed, and underlines a connection with England – Zuckerman lives now in England, with a counter-Maria, mentioned only briefly in 'Judea' and 'Aloft' – and America. Eliot, the

[106] *Ibid*, 175.
[107] *Ibid*, 180.

great modernist poet who made his literary home in London was also a famed anti-Semite. Zuckerman, the Jewish novelist, finds no groove in which to remain. England becomes a symbolic zone too of Jewish otherness.

The literary references and the extremity of the situation serve not only to make very dramatic the concerns present in the largely domestic remainder of the novel, but also to suggest a kind of dream world, a kind of nightmare verging on surrealism.

A farce, climaxing in blood: this strikes me as a kind of key to the novel, each and every episode culminates in blood. The stopped blood of Henry, the spilt blood of Ben-Joseph, the stopped blood now of Nathan Zuckerman, the hypothetical blood of circumcision (a hypothetical within a web of hypotheticals). Eliot is mentioned by the airline thug and seems himself to become a kind of counterlife of Zuckerman too, representing hatred of the 'Jewish *id*'[108], the id which Zuckerman and Roth make a focal point of their art. *The Counterlife* shares with Eliot something of his poetic syllogisms in *Four Quartets*:

> Time present and time past
> Are both perhaps present in time future,
> And time future contained in time past.
> If all time is eternally present
> All time is unredeemable.
> What might have been is an abstraction
> Remaining a perpetual possibility
> Only in a world of speculation.[109]

[108] *Ibid*, 183.

[109] T. S. Eliot, 'Burnt Norton' in *Four Quartets*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), 3.

'Aloft' is the thrilling and violent hight of *The Counterlife*'s visceral, Israel-focussed centre. Hereafter stories of otherness return to a kind of domesticity, in 'Gloucestershire' and 'Christendom'. Though the story-world becomes more domestic, the text becomes more intricate, layered. Rather than outlining each, I want to focus on 'Maria', that shifting bundle of signifiers, that other counterlife, who also draws us back to the transferential mode of *The Ghost Writer* (and much of Roth's fiction) and *All Visitors Ashore*. Maria is a kind of object of cathexis, both for the brothers Zuckerman (variously), and for the novel itself, which always at least obliquely concerns her. Maria is by turns a Swiss-German, blonde-ideal for Henry; she is the English expatriate; Nathan's upstairs neighbour with whom he (of course) sleeps, for whom *he* not Henry has the affair and then the operation and then dies; and then the interlocutor of the ghost of the writer Zuckerman himself after death. She is Nathan's English wife, for whom he moves across the Atlantic, about whom he writes, who reads her incarnation in his work and who leaves him. Maria is a perfect realisation of Roth's stated aim: 'The idea is to perceive your invention as a reality that can be understood as a dream. The idea is to turn flesh and blood into literary characters and literary characters into flesh and blood.'[110] Maria acts as a kind of portal across which flesh becomes literary, the literary becomes flesh.

[110] Philip Roth, 'The Art of Fiction No. 84' in *The Paris Review*, Fall, 1984, accessed 28 July, 2021, https://theparisreview.org/interviews/2957/the-art-of-fiction-no-84-philip-roth

Maria's introduction, or *a* Maria's introduction, comes very early in 'Basel' as a dental patient and impliedly Henry's first experience with adultery. A sexual awakening, representing to Henry a kind of escape from the ordinary (in the way his escape in 'Judea' becomes Agor and zealotry). Maria is of course filtered through the notes and draft eulogy which may or may not be largely imagined by Zuckerman. In this incarnation she is European, demure and passionate, a model for whom he continues to search, for instance in the sweet and desperate Wendy (italics in text):

> *…their parting would be so horrendous – it had all been so new to both of them that they had made adultery positively virginal. It had never occurred to Henry, until Maria came along to tell him so, that a man who looked like him could probably sleep with every attractive woman in town. He was without sexual vanity and deeply shy, a young man still largely propelled by feelings of decorum that he had imbibed and internalized and never seriously questioned. Usually the more appealing the woman, the more withdrawn Henry was; with the appearance of an unknown woman whom he found particularly desirable, he would become hopelessly, rigidly formal, lose all spontaneity, and often couldn't even introduce himself without flushing. That was the man he'd been as a faithful husband – that's why he'd been a faithful husband/ And now he was doomed to be faithful again.*[111]

Maria, then, and the freedom of sexual liaisons, are the apparent generative causes of Henry's hysterical health-choices, the feeling of the prison gates closing on the middle aged loins. The play of the symbolic, the literary, and the 'flesh' at its most visceral, is the defining feature of their affair. The farce, near parody, taken with full intensity is

[111] Philip Roth, *The Counterlife*, 10-11.

never so extreme as the lengthy discussion of 'anal love' (Zuckerman's notes):

> Then in bed, anal love. After initial difficulties both ecstatic. H.: "This is how I marry you, this is how I make you my wife!" "Yes, and nobody knows, Henry! I am a virgin there no longer and nobody knows! They all think I'm so good and responsible. Nobody knows!"[112]

Lines like these when read aloud cause snorts of laughter, embarrassed blushes. Anal virginity is an awkward topic and seems to go well beyond even the 'queasy undergraduate scratching at his pimples' Woolf saw in Joyce (and we might see in D. H Lawrence), and this is of course a trick Roth employs repeatedly through his career. The subject is high and the content low, borderline pornographic. The tone is hysterical. The subject is love and also identity; the roleplaying, a counter-virginity, a secret story between two that presents a new kind of reality ('this is how I make you my wife'); a game between lovers that sets up a dream kingdom for themselves. But the subject is also, in a word, gross. Maria is a counter person even here, counter wife, and counter virgin now deflowered, secret wife and secret life. She is also European, specifically Swiss, and with it blonde and fair and not in the least Semitic. The gap between this *Shiksa* fantasy, this counter-woman, and reality lands Zuckerman on the second most important musing on himself and Henry – on their roles as fiction and fact in fiction:

> How absurd, how awful, if the woman who'd awakened in [Henry] the desire to live differently, who meant to him a break with the

[112] *Ibid*, 31.

> past, a revolution against the old way of life that had reached an emotional standstill – against the belief that life is a series of duties to be perfectly performed – if that woman was to be nothing more or less than the humiliating memory of his first (and last) great fling *because she observed Christmas and we do not*. If Henry had been right about the origins of his disease, if it did indeed result from the stress of that onerous defeat and those arduous feelings of self-contempt that dogged him long after her return to Basel, then, curiously enough, it was being a Jew that had killed him.
>
> If/then. As the afternoon wore on, he began to feel himself straining more and more after an idea that would release those old notes from their raw factuality and transform them into a puzzle for his imagination to solve. While peeing in the upstairs bathroom, he thought, "Suppose on that afternoon she'd secretly come to the house, after they married each other by performing anal love, he watched her, right in this room, pinning up her hair before getting in with him to take a shower. Seeing him adoring her – seeing his eyes marvel at this strange European woman who embodies simultaneously both innocent domesticity and lurid eroticism – she says, confidently smiling, 'I really look extremely Aryan with my hair up and my jaw exposed.' 'What's wrong with that?' he asks. 'Well, there's a quality in Aryans that isn't very attractive – as history has shown.' 'Look,' he tells her, 'let's not hold the century against you…'"
>
> No, that's not them, thought Zuckerman, and came down the stairs into the living room where Wendy was still nowhere to be seen. But then it needn't be "them" – could be me, he thought. Us. What if instead of the brother whose obverse existence mine inferred – and who himself untwinnishly inferred me – I had been the Zuckerman boy in that agony? What is the real wisdom of that predicament? Could it be simple for anyone? If that is indeed how those drugs incapacitate most of the men who must take them to live, then there's a bizarre epidemic of impotence in this country whose personal implications nobody's scrutinizing, not in the press or even on Donahue, let alone in fiction…[113]

These projections and turns happen almost in real time, recorded as Zuckerman's thoughts at the funeral – grief and literary opportunism at once. And Maria here, not yet a character in her own right beyond the sexual obsession, the sexual liberation, the symbolic figure. The name

[113] *Ibid*, 45-46.

Maria too holds in its history these transferential focal points: the virgin Mary is called Maria in Italian, and of course gives her name to the so-called 'madonna-whore complex' which floats around the versions of Maria throughout. All this talk of 'anal love' and virginity, and Maria here as 'Aryan'; while Mary in religious art is not portrayed as blonde (our brunette Mary comes about in the later chapters), both blondness and Mary become symbols of the Christian west. The question remains: who here is doing the projecting exactly? Henry in 'Gloucestershire' believes this entirely the work of Zuckerman: 'Nathan called all shiksas Maria – the explanation seemed as ludicrously simple as that'.[114] This too is answered in the passage, the 'brother whose obverse existence mine inferred', is the double then, the other side of the coin, the Janus face. Across the novel each is married to Maria (if only symbolically), and each makes of her a cathectic point of sheer symbol. So the train of thought that leads Zuckerman to his solipsistic 'what if it were I' type questioning is necessitated not only by brotherhood and shared male sexual fixations, but also with Maria floating there in the background, saint and symbol, freedom and trap, endless other.

The switch is not only in who dies and who is dead, who escapes their life and who escapes life – it is also how these obverse images reflect and refract around a changing Maria. Maria, I think, becomes a kind of litmus test for the *version* of the novel each part presents – she

[114] *Ibid*, 233

is first nearly a fiction within the fiction. Which is to say that she is initially only reported via Zuckerman's notes from conversations with his brother. And then she is merely a signal of change: 'Judea' and 'Aloft' appear to exist in the same universe, and in this universe Maria is married to Zuckerman. Then in 'Gloucestershire' Maria twists back into a figure of temptation, though not blonde and Swiss this time but brunette and English and with a daughter of her own: *mother* Mary. The temptation is not escape for Henry into exoticism, but escape for Zuckerman into domesticity. The life of the writer being a kind of incantatory bachelordom in much of Roth's fiction (and especially the Zuckerman novels) – where a man sits furiously typing and processing the world, alone in the dark, and ventures out into a world of farce and tragedy and sex, dredging it back home to the blank page. The domestic world of wife and child and happy house are at once temptations to be yearned for (or avoided), and fantastic sources of ridicule and desperation when seen with the cold eye of the outsider – that tragi-comic scene where Carol begs Henry to 'fuck [her] like a woman' outside the airport. And Maria-as-mother, as well as Anglo-Christian, becomes a flight not into a freer world, the author does not lack freedom of that kind, but a kind of portal to a real obverse world – a world like his brother's, perhaps. And so, the temptations flip, the cards reshuffle, another corner of the multiverse comes into focus in that 'world of speculation' made real:

> A year after being put on the drugs, still alive and feeling fit, no longer plagued by cartoon visions of male erections and ejaculations, when I have begun to contain the loss by forcing myself to understand that this is not the worst deprivation, not at my age and after my experience, just as I've begun to accept the only real wisdom – to live without what I no longer have – a temptress appears to test to the utmost this tenuous "adjustment". If for Henry there's Wendy, who is there for me? As I haven't had to endure his marriage or suffer his late sexual start, a vampire-seductress won't really do to lure me to destruction. It can't be for more of what I've tasted that I risk my life, but for what's unknown, a temptation by which I've never before been engulfed, a yearning mysteriously kindled by the wound itself. If the uxorious husband and devoted paterfamilias dies for clandestine erotic fervour, then I shall turn the moral tables: I die for family life, for fatherhood.[115]

This of course throws the text's created world into the air, destabilising once again the readerly sense of reality. This alternate version casts at the very least 'Basel' into confusion. Is this first person Zuckerman imagining his own scenario with reference to his brother's (that 'epidemic' now reaching him, too), or is the first section a *story* inside the world of the text, is this *the reality*? A complicated explosion goes on in 'Gloucestershire', whereby Henry's fate in 'Basel' is now Nathan's, and Henry after Nathan's death finds the drafts of the first four sections of the novel, ending the story of Nathan's move to England with Maria (which the reader has not yet read). The complexity here is where the 'truth' lies in this world of speculation – does this segment present a break from a fiction, or more fiction still? Is this one segment with Henry Zuckerman 'true', the previous three segments destroyed with

[115] *Ibid*, 186.

him and seen only by the reader as the text drops into the past not as *past qua past* but as a past text?

The answer it seems to me lies in Maria, and lies in the end of the section 'Christendom' which we read last and which Henry does not destroy. James Newlin makes the case for reading *The Counterlife* as an actualisation of Derrida's literary theory, and particularly of the notion that readers encounter texts at their edges – that these edges like those of an envelope 'fold back' upon themselves.[116] His contention is that Roth 'is', despite his own claims to the contrary, a literary theorist. A practitioner of 'theory' in the applied form of the novel; arguing thus that the destabilising sections at the end of 'Gloucestershire' are in fact 'edges' of the 'Christendom' chapter, and thereby present a kind of theory via which the reader-scholar (sic) approaches this final segment. On the one hand Newlin is of course perfectly right – the very placement of the chapter forces one to consider 'Christendom' in the confused half-light of a fictional world. Zuckerman is dead and this is the final piece of his work which Henry did not destroy. Though the reader would be unwise to simply take those events at face-value, nothing else of the novel has been so straightforward. Newlin's argument, as it concerns *The Counterlife* is essentially that the 'gap' in the text opening with the death of Nathan Zuckerman, and folding into itself, closing again with the opening of 'Christendom' and thus creating

[116] James Newlin, 'Living on the Edge: Deconstruction, the Limits of Readability, and Philip Roth's The Counterlife', *Philip Roth Studies* 8, no 2 (2012), 169.

a 'double invagination', a pocketing of the text within the text-world: 'What appears to remain is a piece of writing that, like *Carnovsky*, exists only inside the world of Roth's fictional text. Yet, unlike *Carnovsky*, it is not named. It is not referenced. Its presence can only be detected through the attention of the spectral reader-scholar.'[117]

In reality Newlin's reading does little to open out the novel. It favours instead transforming *The Counterlife* into a foot-soldier for Derrida's post-structural sense of all complicated texts. Rather than unconvincingly claiming this is somehow inherent in the text itself, Newlin might be advised to simply admit that he's engaged not in interpretation but Derridan *application*. The fairly simple observation that this novel folds in on itself through referring to and destabilising its own constituent parts does not require this terminological super-structure. Similarly the assertion that 'Christendom' is given the same kind of ontological weight as 'Carnovski' (Zuckerman's famous novel, and a kind of *Portnoy's Complaint* stand in). 'Christendom' does not 'only exist inside the world of Roth's fictional text' to any greater extent than any other portion of the text. Unless the section of the novel between Zuckerman's death and his sudden resurrection in 'Christendom' – Newlin's 'gap' – is given significant weight that no other section of the novel seems to be, then we are left merely with more confusion, rather than a skeleton-key. And given the unchanged

[117] *Ibid*, 173.

narrative voice, the lack of any suggestion that this section itself is not, or at least may not, be written by Zuckerman too, the only support for a sense that it is *real* in some way the rest of the novel is not (recall, not only 'Christendom', but the first three parts of the novel are referenced too) is that the other sections of the novel are actively mentioned. Yet there is no reason to think this is not another counterlife – another possible direction for this novel of parallel worlds, another possibility in this textual multiverse. While Newlin's case may be jaundiced, two observations are important, if unbalanced: firstly the similarities to Kafka's unfinished works, and secondly the importance of the idea of the manuscript.

And although one might agree with the Henry of the second part of 'Gloucestershire' that Zuckerman simply names all *shiksas* 'Maria', the turning zone she occupies suggests something more – it suggests the character being worked out in the draft, the pieces not only move in relation to each other but change shape as they do. Yet something symbolic remains after one section sweeps another away: the structure of temptation and escape and obsession even unto death. In the three versions of a confirmed dead Zuckerman brother, as much as anything is confirmed in a novel so inherently ephemeral, all deaths link to a version of Maria, an idealised woman, an object of transference who leaps in time from the page.

The brilliance of 'Christendom' is the portrait coming to life, in the object becoming subject. Zuckerman in this version is married to Maria

and step-father to her daughter Phoebe, he has returned from a flight from Tel Aviv (a ghost, a counter of the flight in 'Judea'). Nathan's domestic life is chiefly in England, an England where anti-Semitism is around every corner. Not virulent bigotry, nor the violent political hostilities of Israel, but a muted English bigotry hidden on those quaint streets, in those expensive restaurants, those verdant hills and shires, in all that Christmas shopping ('Londoners…turned into a battalion of Christmas-savouring Christians').[118] Zuckerman describes with tensely shattering realism two forces overwhelming a marriage: anti-Semitism on the one hand, and a jumpy paranoia about the same on the other. And undergirding both a mounting failure of communication. The section describes at some length a visit to Maria's mother at Holly Tree Cottage, this English world comforting and homely and sane to Maria, stifling and oppressive to Zuckerman: '…worn Oriental carpets on the dark wood floors and on the walls a lot of family portraits along with several portraits of horses. Everything was a little worn and all in very discreet taste – chintz curtains with birds and flowers and lots of polished wood.'[119]

The conversation too becomes a kind of complicated game, an American reading of the subtleties and snark of English cultural games. Zuckerman praises the house and furniture too much, he asks too directly about Mrs Freshfield's reading (her austere love of Austen itself

[118] Philip Roth, *The Counterlife*, 262.
[119] *Ibid*, p.272.

a kind of tacit reference to Gilbert Ryle, who when asked whether he reads novels responded 'Oh yes. All six. Every year.').[120] More explicit is a later conversation with Maria's intelligent, acidic, self avowedly 'unstable' sister, Sarah. Sarah accuses Nathan of hypergamy, then explains that it refers to sleeping with a woman of 'a superior social class'.[121] Take the following passage, towards the end of their conversation:

> "You laugh very quietly, I notice. You don't want to show too much. Is that because you're in England and not in New York? Is that because you don't want to be confused with the amusing Jews you depict in fiction? Why don't you just go ahead and show some teeth? Your books do – they're all teeth. You however, keep very well hidden the Jewish paranoia which produces vituperation and the need to strike out – if only, of course, with all the Jewish 'jokes.' Why so refined in England and so coarse in *Carnovsky*? The English broadcast on such low frequencies – Maria particularly emits *such* soft sounds, the voice of the hedgerows, isn't it? – that it must be terribly worrying whether you're going suddenly to forget yourself, bare your teeth, and cut loose with the ethnic squawk. Don't worry about what the English will think, the English are too polite for pogroms – you have fine American teeth, show them when you laugh. You look Jewish, unmistakably. You can't possibly hide that by not showing your teeth."[122]

The stereotyping dressed up in articulacy, the accusations dressed as observations, this is the key to Zuckerman's sense of English bigotry: just like these comments about jokes and teeth, nothing more than snarling and putrid bigotry wrapped up in a sophisticated shell. Where Mrs Freshfield dresses herself in class superiority, Sarah dresses herself in a kind of performative *directness*.

---

[120] Giles Barber, "A Philosopher and His Books." *The Linacre Journal* 3, (1999): 17–26.

[121] Philip Roth, *The Counterlife*, 282.

[122] *Ibid*, 283.

Instances thus only accrue, taking a toll on a straining relationship, increasingly focussed around the problems of raising their future child. Questions around christening and circumcision obsess Nathan who senses in himself the outsider, the alienated Jew. Maria meanwhile insisting that people no longer think that way, implying that Nathan is in effect paranoid or at the very least over-attuned to anti-Semitic slights.[123] These tensions rise in realist fashion – the struggles in a relationship which might prove terminal and eventually do – 'she came from somewhere and so did I, and those differences we talked so much about could begin to have a corrosive effect once the charm began wearing thin.'[124]

The novel ends with a startling epistolary denouement, throwing the chapter itself back into confusion again. Maria has left a note, a leaving note, a goodbye note – to Zuckerman, to the novel itself. Zuckerman breaks down the opening of the note, turns it into fragments, presented like a poem:

> I'm leaving.
> I've left.
> I'm leaving you.
> I'm leaving the book.[125]

The double rush, the double meanings throughout these two letters vibrate with the counterlives and counter-stories that make up the novel. The notes exist as fiction and fact in a realist story, or in a

[123] *Ibid*, 291.
[124] *Ibid*, 312.
[125] *Ibid*, 316.

metafictional story, and finally dissolve in both directions. In one reading Maria really has *woken up*, a metafictional creation escaping the slave-master of the author:

> I know characters rebelling against their author has been done before, but as my choice of a first husband should have made clear – at least to me – I have no desire to be original and never did. I loved you and it was kind of thrilling to live totally as somebody else's invention [….] Sure it's lovely being listened to as opposed to being shut up, but it's also quite creepy to think that I am monitored closely only to be even more manipulated and exploited than I was when you extracted me (for artistic purposes) from my situation upstairs.[126]

This novel of alternatives finally produces a singularity of alternatives – not in different visions presented but in alternating interpretations, doubling not in character but in the moment itself. Maria here is the character walking off the page of the novel. She has read all the drafts – she mentions the details, the 'facts'. And yet at once she is also a wife, leaving her husband, an author who has used their lives. That theme of the vampire again – the husband extracting your life to make his art. And in turn the art comes to control the life: 'why this preoccupation with irreconcilable conflict?'.[127]

Maria, the shimmering centre of the book, seems to me the 'irreducible core' of the novel just as Zuckerman's Judaism becomes, at least in her reading of their relationship, his own. Maria in her letter again takes on the brunt of the novel's fractured force. She is both the metafictional creation and the very real wife, the character and the

[126] *Ibid*, 316.

[127] *Ibid*, 317.

person. The temptress ('porn queen') who draws out not just a kind of erotic male desire becomes the temptress who draws out its obverse, the domestic promise. She becomes the failed dream. A failed dream is of course a way to describe a real person, a way to describe the hairline cracks of the portrait too. Maria serves a higher realism within the prison of the covers of a book and Zuckerman's words remind us of this fact: she cannot escape the brush strokes, the built-world, no matter how real and how moving. She is 'the nearest thing to life'.[128] That will have to do for her, for us.

The metaphor best used to understand *The Counterlife* in all its complexities is the alternate path, the parallel universe. Draft chapters shuffled in a manuscript: the manifold possible directions a fiction might take, reminiscent of a Kafka novel, that sense of compilation *after the fact*, of the found document. Their order compiled by Roth or Zuckerman or both, and reflecting that sense of *Unfertigkeit*, the unfinished.

Where Roth seems to open out that garden of forking paths, Stead in *The End of The Century at The End of The World* gathers what seem a heap of accreted false starts, or dropped starts, into a smooth narrative cycle – bringing those pieces into the tunnel of its vision. The shuffling here is not the changed paths of total reality, but the changed

[128] George Eliot, 'The Natural History of German Life,' *Westminster Review* LXVI (1856): 51-79.

modes of the story – its genre and type, its voice and point-of-view. But there is not, it seems to me, an epistemic doubt that there *is* a story to be told. What Stead is doing here is dramatizing the modes and methods used to find *the* story, and turning this figuring-it-out into the story itself.

The End is deceptively complex in form, and complicates itself at the level of structure rather than the level of the sentence. Quite different from *All Visitors Ashore*, with its taffy-stretched syntax and lapping waves. What seems to characterise Stead's mature voice as a novelist – no frills, simple chiefly declarative sentences, distinguished by the odd flight into numinous fancy – is in full swing by this, his fifth, novel. Gone is the modernist swing of the loping sentence, the teetering that bursts into a full-tilt run of near stream-of-consciousness. Instead we have declaratives which complicate themselves – 'My name is Laura Vine Barber, 26 Rangiview Crescent, Eastern Bays, Auckland'.[129] This declarative upon which our sense of story is hung, the essential *who* and *when*, is a simplification in all directions. Not only because it is not strictly accurate, but because it obscures Laura's past (her maiden name, Jackson). It obscures too, or likely obscures, even her present. Where does Laura live when she writes this sentence, if *she* writes this sentence? This declarative, itself declared a fiction as the novel closes, brings the reader into a curious loop, an ouroboros

[129] C.K. Stead, *The End of The Century At The End of The World*, 9.

structure shattering the simplicity of the claim. The claim is challenged and extended from the first, though, as Laura adds:

> I run that through my mind in the way my children do when they go on to add "New Zealand, the World, the Universe, Space". What else? Married…[130]

One preoccupation of this novel is pinning down the story, getting it right, finding the correct detail. This is the work of the academic researcher too. The geographical detail is not only 'setting', that notion so generic as to be near tautological, and it not only represents Laura's endlessly reticulated academic precision. It defines the structure of the novel. As Stead's Auckland novels always do, it concerns comings and goings although it is unusually domestic – no sojourns overseas, not even an oncoming voyage for any character but Maurice Scobie, and his journey will not take him over the bowl of the Pacific but the dead-stream of the Styx. Auckland is the place, and again chiefly the North Shore, though nothing like its romantic double in *All Visitors Ashore*. In *The End*, Stead shows us an Auckland developed already and still developing at speed. Historic houses shuttering and being torn down, and Takapuna not at all recognisable as an artistic enclave but a kind of modern built-up zone. As Dan Cooper sees it (as we see him seeing in the close third – one of the many switches of voice in this novel made up of bits) as he passes by:

> …he doesn't enjoy seeing the wood and corrugated iron which belonged to his childhood and still seem to him romantic,

[130] *Ibid*, 9.

> replaced by those anonymous replicas of international commerce.[131]

Geography exists curiously in this novel. Like the lives it houses – brief, confused, inspired, fragmented – it shifts and shudders. But unlike lives it remains rooted in some sense (be it illusory) of its own facticity. When Laura looks out at Rangitoto, the dense green of its bush-scape making 'seeing seem like touching', she appears to sense some deep structure sitting below them, just as Scobie senses a vastness above them in the stars. And herein lies the tension of this novel: the minute fragments of personal lives, dramas which do not in any real sense 'matter' but define our stories like little universes existing inside the vastness of space, and the shifting and churning of tectonic plates:

> It was all going on out there, the great daily nothing of the suburb and the weather, the shipping and the tides, the shopping and hedge-trimming and talk of what the Government had and hadn't done, while under-ground the plates advanced on one another and ground their teeth and checked their watches second by millennial second against the next eruption.[132]

Searing explosions into vastness act as textual equivalents to Laura's obiter musings extending from an address to a coordinate in time and space ('New Zealand, the World, the Universe, Space'). This needling the context into wider and wider vantage points is not only to make the very Steadian assertion that what happens in New Zealand, in Auckland, on the shore, is connected seamlessly to everything outside of itself, but also defines the way the central figures in the book operate

[131] *Ibid*, 98.

[132] *Ibid*, 35.

– always self-searching, always wanting to know where they belong, what their actions meant in senses larger and larger. So Laura connects to the harbour and the vast geography of the Earth, and Dan searches his records and finds his memoir, and he tries to use his political position to enshrine his aunt's house, to hold on to the past and scribe it via place into the land. Maurice Scobie searches the stars and his books for evidence of what it all meant (what his ebbing political commitments really meant, what his war experience meant). All the while the novel keeps switching modes and tones and points of view, trying to find its own footing. Against Laura and Dan and Maurice sit those characters who do not seem, are not seen, to question themselves: Ginny Scobie, Maurice's granddaughter and Laura's babysitter; Vince Jackson, Laura's father the middle class businessman; and of course Laura's lawyer husband, Roger. These characters are not morally worse. This novel is not some kind of snobbish critique of middle class philistinism. They are the stable points between which the whirring atoms of the questioning figures might bounce and define and redefine themselves. It is, after all, Ginny who tells the beautiful little parable at Maurice's funeral:

> …she'd tried to think of Maurice's life as a story. There were a lot of different ways of telling any story. Jamie had offered one. "If I had to tell it," she said, "it would go something like this: Once there was a man with a very big faith and very little doubt. Every year of his life the faith shrank and the doubt grew. In the end the doubt ate up the faith, and the man was free."[133]

[133] *Ibid*, 211.

And this life story, crafted like an archetypal myth, a life-structure made into a narrative, is also the textual story that springs from that sentence Laura writes as the novel begins (and as the novel ends). A journey towards doubt and its freedom and, in Laura's case specifically, away from the certainty she sees in the nature of academic discourse and towards the bolder truths of art. After all, it seems the novel we are reading is what Laura began as her academic journey came to a close, to be replaced by the life of the novelist – to make what Hilda Tapler calls 'fiction in the service of what had once been fact.'[134]

But 'fact' and 'fiction' blur in the context of novels in general, and particularly in this novel which is precisely concerned with the way these categories worry each other. The sense of 'fact' is complicated by the very fact we seem to discover that this is not only a novel qua novel, but is likely to be Laura's novel anyway. Its sections may be 'fiction in service of fact', but what the original 'facts' are we cannot know. We have no further evidence, nothing to corroborate. Steve Casey, Laura's doctoral supervisor, sees Tapler's interview with Mansfield as necessarily fiction, unverifiable, and the idea that Mansfield faked her own death and moved back to New Zealand as a kind of speculation, a mental experiment. There is of course no evidence, only an unpublished account written by a writer of fiction. And yet 'Steve saw everything as theory', he is a kind of post-structural

[134] *Ibid*, 123.

academic, although one bearing certain similarities to Stead, a kind of mirror image, one uninterested in fact.[135] Laura strains in the opposite direction – caring about 'truth' and 'fact' – which she sees as not the sole province of history or academic research but of art, of fiction. Late in the novel, when Laura resolves her doctorate into a monograph and outlines in a letter to Dan her theory that Tapler had an affair with his father, comes her biographical reading of a story set in a near-destroyed German town on the Black Forest, wherein a young New Zealand woman and a soldier (Peter and Sibylla[136]) in effect enact the end of an affair:

> Because so much of Hilda's fiction is based on the facts of her life, and illustrates her maxim that she writes, not to invent what didn't happen but to come to terms with what did, I'm of course predisposed to believe that your father was indeed living in Germany in the 1950s and that she went there, spent some time with him, and they parted on good terms. But I have to acknowledge, especially because of the unusual fairy-tale quality, that it could be just a way of finally setting it behind her. I don't think this is likely; but I can't deny it's a possibility. And there I have to be content to leave the matter, since I now want to cross the bridge myself, from the streets of fact to the island of fiction.[137]

---

[135] As Penny has it: 'His name forms a light-hearted link to Stead's – Ca-sey = K. C. Read backwards the result is C. K. Steve.' The knot of implications here is complicated, but worth unpacking: Stead places a sort of Nabokovian in-joke about himself into the text, and yet in the mouth of a professor who, while having a career that rather mirrors Stead's, is not an artist and privileges 'theory' and 'Post-structuralist modes of thought'. In so doing undermines the attention drawn to himself with an intellectual position he thoroughly opposes and sees as faddish. The reader sees Stead as a ghost hovering on both sides of a life – the writer who leaves academia, the academic. See: Judith Dell Panny, *Plume of Bees*, 140.

[136] Steve, himself a near anagram, notices a clue in the character's name: 'Steve sort of woke up (he sometimes gives the impression of only half-listening to me), looked over my shoulder at the name, and said "It's an anagram, isn't it?" You can imagine how I felt. It's obvious, once seen, but I hadn't seen it. Peter Corbot is an anagram of Brett Cooper.' C.K. Stead, *The End of The Century at The End of The World*, 196.

[137] *Ibid*, 198.

The island here is both a focus of the novel – viewed from a distance, considered, mapped – and of course the novel itself, with its recursion back on itself, its boundaries of the constructed real dissolving as you near the very end of the book. As the novel ends and Hilda Tapler's house crashes down amongst the noise of bulldozers and chainsaws, 'timber smashing and glass breaking', whatever seemed fact turns back into mere signs of a reality in flux, a reality threatened.[138] What remains is in fact all Laura says she has in the end, 'the shape and feeling of a novel I would write.'[139]

The 'shape and feeling' are the core of the novel. What Stead via Laura does is riff on and extend out from that statement. One assumes, looping back from the end of the novel to its opening, that in some way we are either given a finished product – that Laura has decided to add the opening paragraph before her first drafted sentence – or that the novel only implies a loop, and is in fact the linear story of the world before the novel. A story of 'material' that the artist must 'come to terms' with. It strikes me that both possibilities are plausible, but the looped novel has something of the 'modernist' aesthetic appeal noted by Frank Kermode, that seems to chime with the structures of making and remaking, of forming and retelling, that define the novel.[140] Some sense of a more anodyne, more comprehensible (and thereby, typical of

[138] *Ibid*, 219.

[139] *Ibid*, 220.

[140] Frank Kermode, "Apocalyptic Opacity." *London Review of Books*, 24 September 1992, accessed 28 July, 2021 https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v14/n18/frank-kermode/apocalyptic-opacity

Stead, more sober-rational) riff on the opening-closing line of Finnegan's Wake, that famous and near incomprehensible sign-song: 'A way a lone a last a loved a long the riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation to Howth Castle and Environs.'[141] A modernist aesthetic notion of 'recirculation', which we might take reasonably to signal recurrence – after all that sentence from Joyce has us begin the book anew – in either metaphysics or structure, is a common modernist notion and Stead was a modernist scholar. Eliot again (closer to Stead's own specialty): 'In my beginning is my end.'[142] In the end of the material is the beginning of the novel – in this novel's end begins its content.

Though of course, even if we take *this* novel to be Laura's novel, we note she does not begin exactly with her draft. Instead we begin in April, which in New Zealand 'bring[s] birthdays, and memories of birthdays'. April mentioned in any opening line evokes Eliot's *The Wasteland*, where April is 'the cruellest month' (Northern hemisphere April being spring, not autumn like in Auckland). Eliot's spring is a kind of mocking thing, cruel to the winter just past. Stead reverses the reversal – autumnal April in Auckland brings spring-like births and memories of births. No cruel month. These references to Eliot are not merely clever or pretty window-dressing. Along with the title of the first

[141] James Joyce, *Finnegan's Wake*, (London: Faber, 1975), 1.

[142] T. S. Eliot, 'East Coker', in *Four Quartets, (London: Faber and Faber, 2001),* 13.

chapter ('At the Bay'), and along with the explicit references to Mansfield, to Sargeson, to Moravia, to Ibsen and to dreaming, and even playfully to Stead himself, there we see that technique made famous in *The Wasteland*. The dissonant pastiche, the jostling verbal objects collaged together. This novel, in a mode more steady (and more Steadian), more comprehensible, shows that the shape of the life and the material that goes into the art, is itself a kind of collage to be sorted out by the artist. That 'coming to terms' again.

What Laura is 'coming to terms' with is not only a moderately unhappy marriage, and not only the tension between artistic aspirations and academic reality, but also with the patterns of the past and how they ring against the future. April brings birthdays which bring Dan Cooper's yearly note (or call), but this particular year, 1990, brings slowly the death of an old friend, Maurice Scobie. Maurice fought in the war with Laura's father, and Maurice's hippy son Terry associated with Dan Cooper in his 'anarchist days' (which were before his political days and after his legal days). Maurice, the clever-sad old man who has a quote for every moment, is dying, does die, and provides not only the human emblem of Hilda Tapler's torn down house, but adds reason, adds material, for Laura to sort it all out. Maurice also provides, in 1971 at a West Coast bach, talking to Laura outside under the stars, one of Stead's most incandescent passages (not only in this novel, but in any of his novels). The ultimate summary of the way *The End* looks out into vastness and complexity, to provide ever widening circles of context

and ever echoing resonances with the lives lived down in New Zealand, by these Aucklanders is in Scobie's speech under the stars:

> …The stars prickled and throbbed, the planets shone. The Southern Cross, in that clear air, seemed to hang forward out of the sky at a rakish angle. A morepork repeated itself in a nearby tree and got an answer from the hills behind.
>
> "It's when you look up there," Maurice said, "you know it's important to insist that there's no God. Otherwise it's just banal. Everything is banality. The big magician made it all – for himself, and for us. He stuck us on this piece of revolving rock to look at it and admire it and praise him for his power and his benevolence…"
>
> Laura could think of nothing to say to this, and after a moment he went on.
>
> "Beauty's the problem. We used to say in the Party that beauty was a factor of utility. But what's useful about the stars? As a system of street lighting they're inadequate. As aids to navigation they're obsolete. So why are they beautiful? But look. There they are."
>
> And there they were. She stared up into the glittering silence and fell faint. They'd tramped a long way that day, but that didn't explain her feeling of weakness. It was as if tiredness had left her open to the influence of the sky, and of Maurice's voice – unprotected against them.
>
> "I try to imagine it all without the human race here to look at it," he said, "and that's difficult. Imagine the whole universe just as it is, all those lovely lights without anyone or anything able to see and to know."
>
> The voice came to her as if she wasn't there; or as if it didn't matter who was there.
>
> "A spoonful of God and you spoil the flavour. You destroy the mystery. 'When I was a child I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child, but when I became a man I put away childish things.' The first childish thing you put away is big daddy who made heaven and earth."
>
> And again, a little later: "It's a cooling star, the sun. We know that now. It must be a new point in the history of the human mind. First we had to come to terms with the fact that we could wipe ourselves out. Now we learn that time will do it anyway. There will have been this single speck of consciousness in the vastness of space, and then, nothing. Can you imagine that? It seems to me so exciting, and so mysterious. We have the best seats in the house. We can look at it all up there and feel the wonder of it. But the price of admission is death." He laughed. "We should be kind to one another. Planet Earth is the universal lifeboat, and it's leaking."[143]

[143] C. K. Stead, *The End of The Century at The End of The World*, 80-81.

This is the central perspective of the novel – the push to look up at the wheeling interstellar maps of the cosmos and appreciate the beauty in the vastness, the excitement of what connects the individual to the heavens. This is a kind of secular mystery: to see the vastness and emptiness and fleeting blip of human consciousness as a wonder, not a horror. And this too highlights a major distinction between Stead and Philip Roth. There is in Stead a kind of desire to celebrate. In Roth the project feels grimmer and more manic, excited by life in all its gore, but not determined to find the beauty in looking up and out and beyond.

To wonder at the vast sky, and to have struggles with one's husband, and to divorce, and to give up on a PhD – these are the points with which the map of this novel are drawn. Between the mundane and the cosmological, between the steady people who keep life moving, and the dreamers who grow confused – that is where the novel takes place. The most enjoyable case-study is Vince Jackson, Laura's father, an 'importer' and National Party member, which is to say rich and not much of a reader. He again complicates the narratives of the book. It is through Vince that Dan meets Laura, and Vince's own real-world bravery fighting in the Second World War is a kind of testament to the lesser state of Dan and the anarchists' sense of political struggle, and their own left-wing rightness. He functions both as a kind of stocky middle-class anti- or rather non-intellectual, but also as a kind of rebuttal to Bill Pearson's 'Fretful Sleepers': he is the middle class unfretful sleeper. The Parnell and Remuera type. The men in rude good

health on into middle age (before strokes and heart problems caused by all the fun get to them); the beer and the smoking, but also the tennis. Pleasure in consumption and action. The man comfortable in the 'anarchist café'. Wryly happy, not clinging to but firmly grasping his own centre-right political clichés as the ballast his comfortable life is built on. After Vince describes finding a scared and young German soldier holding a shaking pistol in a terrified fist, Dan observes:

> I envied him – and then struggled against that feeling. What was the use of experiences like that if they left you as predictable as a Swiss watch, mouthing the thoughts and opinions served up by a sheet of newsprint? No experience was denied an active imagination. And on the other hand without imagination you might experience every kind of human action and be left unaffected. I told myself this; but for just that moment I wasn't sure I believed it.[144]

Afterwards Vince reveals he still has the pistol, suggesting that he did in fact kill the terrified young man. The story is ambiguous, and sad, and left just at that. It highlights not only that these ruddy healthy New Zealanders, of the generation past Dan's own, are not to be looked by as simplistic right-wing goons, but also that there is in that generation (approximately Stead's own) a realisation that theirs is not the life of adventure and serious moral decisions. That their world, separated by not so many years in 1970, is and never will be anything like a Hemingway novel. No matter how many times the generation born late into the war, who did not fight, stand on barricades and yell about Vietnam or Springboks, their world is ultimately that of 'the endless nothing of the suburbs', the minutiae of financial and romantic affairs,

[144] *Ibid*, 54.

and arguments about historic house protection. Not deciding whether to kill the shaking young German in the ruined Italian town. All of this over-thinking and solipsistic worrying is, in those characters who dream and obsess over books and worry the bare threads of their marriages, a kind of privilege and luxury.

How Laura navigates the tensions of the novel, if it is her novel, and how Stead maps them out and guides the constellations of these lives, is through signs and sections. I do not mean this figuratively. Signs play a continuous role in the novel – not only in its suggestive headings, orienting us to time (1990 and the early 1970s), but also the catalogue of actual signs, which exist as both bundles of suggestions and literal guides. Three signs seem to orientate the context in the second and third chapters. 'The magic bagwash', the name of the laundry used by Dan for the anarchist café, promising that 'everything comes out white'.[145] The sign up the hill from the Izen's bach on the West Coast: 'Happy Valley'.[146] And the fateful 'Pararaha Valley: For Experienced Trampers Only'.[147]

Each of these signs, even quoting them with minimal context, seem to reach out and demand to be read metaphorically. 'The magic bagwash', where everything comes out white, is to some degree a kind

[145] *Ibid*, 72.
[146] *Ibid*, 82.
[147] *Ibid*, 83.

of wish-thinking, a kind of desperation, for Dan who structures his 'fragment of autobiography'[148] around the origins of his affair with Laura and the beginning of the end of the 'anarchist' far left part of his life. Dan had not yet been billed by the laundry. On his birthday, the 'account came from the Magic Bagwash'. There seems little need to tease out the significance here, the overt symbolism of the account from the drycleaner, the promise that it will all 'come out white', signalling of course some sense of things sorting themselves out. The promise of purity or forgiveness perhaps, or really just tumbling through the laundry, ready for a new cycle, a new setting of the tablecloth – all very close to that cliché *it all comes out in the wash*. And this is the strategy of Stead's sign-language in *The End*, a toying with images and phrases so generic that they operate as clichés on the edge of vision – hanging there, seeming to mean a lot. But of course it all comes out in the wash, how that wash turns out – a divorce for Laura, a baby and a marriage for Dan, death for Maurice – is in how the accounts are settled. This is all about settling accounts, accounting for what must go through the wash.

Maurice Scobie and Lee Lomas are having a kind of affair when the group, two couples (Laura and Dan, and Lee and Dick), and Maurice (sleeping with Lee and flirting with Laura), stay at the Itzen's west coast home. The arrangement of the couples is confused, and only after

[148] *Ibid*, 70.

the split do we find out that Dick too was having an affair. But the night after Laura sits with Maurice contemplating the stars and the beauty of a world without God, Laura is woken by shots:

> Up the grassy slope that sheltered the hollow from winds off the sea was an old wooden sign that read "Happy Valley". It shuddered as each shot went through it. At the outer edges bits of wood flew off. She craned her head to see where the shots were coming from. Dick Lomas was sitting in the grass with a .22 rifle, loading and firing at the sign. His face was neither grim nor smiling – just businesslike.[149]

The business of shooting holes in the Happy Valley sign. Much like how, in the same third chapter ('The Other Coast'), the hikers come to a fork in the track and follow the 'sign saying "Pararaha Valley: For Experienced Trampers Only".'[150] This is the mosaic that makes meaning – near meaningless symbols with an air of importance. One imagines 'life' scrawled in graffiti on the Pararaha Valley warning sign. Each of these signs can be turned into a little didactic story, like a parable. Happy Valley is an illusion, just an old sign. Only by going down the steep track does the tramper find that essential 'experience'. And eventually we must pay our bills, if we want our tablecloths returned clean and white and ready for use.

It all coming out white in the end is a promise. It is also the fear, the worry of being 'left with only meaningless fragments'.[151] And these three signs, these almost-clichés, show the attempt to string the fragments together. Eliot again: 'these fragments I have shored against

---

[149] *Ibid*, 82.

[150] *Ibid*, 83.

[151] *Ibid*, 86.

my ruins'.[152] Hence the ambiguous signs, hence the unstable narrative, hence the self-deprecating prose (Dan: 'this will be my final flourish'),[153] and the stop-start and switch-back of chapters. The novel is process itself. The novel is the shoring up of fragments against the ruins of time unless, like a wooden house on a beach looking at the Hauraki Gulf, it is one day torn down with a crash of glass and concrete.

Stars wheel overhead even when we do not see them. The man dies or he does not die or his brother dies. The character gets up and walks out of the book. Or the wife out of the front door. The author begins her novel, or has already finished it. These are two books that vibrate with doubt. Doubt about their own stories and their own construction, about their own status, ontological doubt. Doubt about memory and authenticity, about identity and the bonds that tie us together, about the lines that novelists draw between events and action that make them into story, narrative, novel. And yet both act as celebrations. Laura's story ends, as it were, at her beginning. The novel has started, art is moving. Zuckerman's final words on the page are both a reassertion of authorial power and a plea for understanding – saying, in effect, *this is all we have got*. And all the reader has are these stories of stories; not displays of some theoretical superstructure, or a Magritte-like drawing attention to obvious-not-obvious. This is not the world –

[152] T. S. Eliot, "The Wasteland.' Poetry Foundation https://www.poetry foundation.org/poems/47311/the-waste-land

[153] C.K. Stead, *The End of The Century at The End of The World*, 41.

and yet, it is the best we have. What Roth and Stead do is to light up the process, the difficulty, the real story of making stories real – the merging of intention and material, the changing of paths. They take us into the eye of the storm, never flinching from those hairline cracks, never pretending that the seams do not show:

> At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
> Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
> But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
> Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
> Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
> There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.[154]

[154] T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 5.

Chapter Three
The Puritans and The Professors: Scandal and Doubt in *The Human Stain* and *The Death of The Body*

'In many ways, writing is the act of saying I, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying *listen to me, see it my way, change your mind.* It's an aggressive, even hostile act.'
– Joan Didion[155]

This is an uncomfortable chapter to write. It is uncomfortable because, for all that I am accustomed to scandal viewed from behind the protective portal of my computer screen, what I am used to in the scandals of my era is a narrative of remarkable clarity: a predatory figure with a wandering eye and scruples withered by narcissism and ego looms up and claims the body, the dignity, of someone who for one reason or another cannot say *no*, who cannot *enact* a desire to say no. Neither *The Human Stain* nor *The Death of The Body* relate narratives like this, narratives which while horrifying have the advantage of moral clarity and predictability. These novels do however relate scandals, scandals which vibrate with near-exactitude to the more recent crises in the sexual politics of our era. In *The Human Stain*, a star classicist by the name of Coleman Silk is embroiled in two scandals. He is pushed into an early retirement for asking whether or not a group of absentee students in his class were 'spooks'. This word, innocuous to him, sets off a chain of outrage and condemnation. Silk, in the aftermath of his ruined career and wife's death, takes up with Faunia Farley, an apparently illiterate janitor half his age. In *The Death of The Body*,

[155] Joan Didion, *Let Me Tell You What I Mean* (Dublin: Harper Collins, 2021), 45.

another professor: the Auckland philosopher, Harry Butler. Harry Butler is sleeping with one of his students, Louise Lamont, and for want of a less blurb-friendly phrase: the departmental 'Women's Collective' is moving in. These are campus stories, these are stories of men in power either entangled in or at the very brink of scandal. These are uncomfortable stories because their narration is concerned in significant part with the defence of Coleman Silk and Harry Butler; not only their defence but (in counterassault) the dismissal of their accusers. These novels of scandal, if published today, would *be* scandals.

This context is important because if we want to read the men of Roth and Stead's generation seriously, we cannot ignore the importance of sexual or identitarian politics. We cannot ignore the animating disdain for certain aspects of what we now call progressivism. The context of this reading cannot – as much as I might prefer this – be counted out as merely a *different time*. These novels are themselves concerned with identity and story, how we relate to scandal and to morally grey situations. Relevant too is the fact that Stead and Roth are contemporary novelists whose work, if we are to continue to study it, will be looked at from the myopic present. *Things were different then* is not good enough for the general reader, nor me. And yet I am not proposing a philistine investigation into how the moral visions of these two novels clash with my own, that of my peers, of the narratives of my time. I propose rather to excavate how scandal is presented in each – where the weight of the telling lends itself, in this case to those we would now see as in a great deal of power. But these authors, through ingenious and very active narration, make victims or potential victims of these characters. These are novels about the imposition of a perspective. They concern and enact a moral or even an epistemic vision upon the scenes of their scandals.

My concern in this short chapter is not, like the first two, the mapping out of systematic aspects of the novels – how they operate on

the synapses and structures. Here my focus is explicitly on the framing of scandal, the weight of judgement.

In *The Human Stain,* an impotent and incontinent Nathan Zuckerman[156] builds out the story of Coleman Silk's disgrace and death. In *The Death of The Body*, we have an ambiguous narrator who is likely a journalist friend of Harry's named Phil. But his identity in terms of the novel is important chiefly as the deliverer not only of Harry's story, but his own in writing it down and figuring it out. In Roth's *The Human Stain* there is a wholescale, Zuckerman-woven denunciation of a kind of new puritanism, evoked over and again by explicit analogic reference to the Clinton-Lewinsky affair. In Stead's *The Death of The Body*, we have a kind of wry telling of a 'frame'[157] story, as Stead has it. A story that takes several angles – thriller, campus novel, philosophical novel – and dramatizes its own making. But in so doing I think it also engages in a kind of escape fantasy, wherein the transferential female figure (again), here in the form of Harry's wife Claire, this time becomes a kind of saviour and the scandal simmers into 'a joke, or at worst, an embarrassment'.[158] In the one case, then, a narrator who sees full scale collapse and sheer tragedy, madness and trauma and death by murder from a scandal. In the other, a dream of escape and no-harm-done, and life moving on.

The best entry into Zuckerman's perspective on Silk – and this novel *is* a Zuckerman novel, whether he is quiet or not – is there plainly in the opening monologues. The most pertinent is Zuckerman's incantatory dredging up of the social context, worth quoting in full not only because it shows Roth at his stylistic best – wry and clever and outraged, apocalyptic and slightly hysterical all at once – but because it

[156] An apparently weaker and less ebullient presence in the so called 'American Trilogy' than in the other novels concerning this thesis.
[157] Judith Dell Panny, *Plume of Bees*, 105.
[158] C.K. Stead, *The Death of The Body*, 206.

sets up the basic narrative sense of the tension between Silk and his colleagues:

> It was the summer in America when the nausea returned, when the joking didn't stop, when the speculation and the theorizing and the hyperbole didn't stop, when the moral obligation to explain to one's children about adult life was abrogated in favor of maintaining in them every illusion about adult life, when the smallness of people was simply crushing, when some kind of demon had been unleashed in the nation and, on both sides, people wondered "Why are we so crazy," when men and women alike, upon awakening in the morning, discovered that during the night, in a state of sleep that transported them beyond envy or loathing, they had dreamed of the brazenness of Bill Clinton. I myself dreamed of a mammoth banner, draped Dadaistically like a Christo wrapping from one end of the White House to the other and bearing the legend A HUMAN BEING LIVES HERE. It was the summer when – for the billionth time – the jumble, the mayhem, the mess proved itself more subtle than this one's ideology and that one's morality. It was the summer when a president's penis was on everyone's mind, and life, in all its shameless impurity, once again confounded America.[159]

Antic Zuckerman may not be in full force, playing his games at methamphetamine speed, but the force of narrative perspective is remarkable. The opening clause has the ring of the history book, the serious tone of the artfully written reflection on an important past. And this makes sense. Roth after all said, '…I thought treat '98 as though it were '48, treat '98 as though it were '68. You see? See it, if you can, as history.'[160] That voice of the historian never loses its polemicist's edge; the glinting razor wire of rage and disgust. Zuckerman turns back on what he perceives as the hypocrites and frauds across the political spectrum and meets their disgust head-on, returning the snarl. He bats back the cries about what smut on television (in the Whitehouse) is doing to the children – the damage is maintaining the illusion, the delusion. Delusion is one candidate for the human stain – the delusion

[159] Philip Roth, *The Human Stain*, 3

[160] Derek Parker Royal, 'Plotting the Frames of Subjectivity: Identity, Death, and Narrative in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*', *Contemporary Literature* 47, no 1 (2006): 114.

that sufficient cleansing will rid us of our pollutants – 'the smallness of people'. This is narrative with furious intent, this is what Didion means by the hostile act of writing: *see it my way, change your mind*.

This is Roth in full polemic swing, it does not let up. And yet the novel also dramatises, as virtually every Zuckerman book does, the process of choosing the narrative process. Zuckerman has, in reality, only two main sources for the life of Coleman Silk: the semi-deranged autobiographical manuscript titled 'Spooks', and the conversations he conducts with Silk's sister, Ernestine. The abandoned autobiographical manuscript is a double reference: to Roth, who first considered calling *The Human Stain*, *Spooks*; [161] and to the long response he wrote and almost published to his then ex-wife Claire Bloom's jeremiad to their marriage, *Leaving A Doll's House*.[162] The fantasy, if indeed there's something of Roth lurking in Coleman Silk, is one of disaster. Often called a farce, the novel has moments of comedy (particularly in the skewering of Delphine Roux, the absurd French professor and trendy theorist). But what *The Human Stain* strikes me as is really a brutal tragedy, an imagining (Roth's, Zuckerman's) of how a man's life may be destroyed by moral hysteria, destroyed hysterically.

But this perspective is Zuckerman's – his construction, his own filling in of the gaps, teasing out the story. Zuckerman remembers, before his graveside interest in writing Silk's story himself, an encounter with the man who was at the time asking Zuckerman to 'write something for him', some kind of defence and counter attack after Iris' death, his *side of the story*:

> All the restraint had collapsed within him, and so watching him, listening to him – a man I did not know, but clearly someone accomplished and of consequence now completely unhinged – was like being present at a bad highway accident or a fire or a frightening explosion, at a public disaster that mesmerizes as

[161] Blake Bailey, *Philip Roth: The Biography* (London: Penguin Random House, 2021), 662.
[162] *Ibid*, 605.

> much by its improbability as by its grotesqueness. The way he careened around the room made me think of those familiar chickens that keep on going after having been beheaded. His head had been lopped off, the head encasing the educated brain of the once unassailable faculty dean and classics professor, and what I was witnessing was the amputated rest of him spinning out of control.[163]

What concerns Zuckerman is exactly that, the potential to spin out of control. What happens to a person of real seriousness – a classical scholar, one of the early 'handful of Jews' (as it turns out, only apparently) on the faculty, a forward thinking and rigorous dean – when injustice driven by moral puritanism takes charge. Zuckerman's impressions of Silk are of a serious person driven half-mad by misfortune not of his own making:

> There is something fascinating about what moral suffering can do to someone who is in no obvious way a weak or feeble person…Once you're in its grip, it's as though it will have to kill you for you to be free of it. Its raw realism is like nothing else.[164]

What is clear from the outset, from the brilliantly explored and endlessly editorialised context of the opening chapter, its title evoking the atmosphere of frantic paranoia ('Everybody Knows'), is that *The Human Stain* is definitively not a novel of victim-ambiguity. Not in a moral sense; we are to know from the outset that Silk is innocent, that Silk will die, that he is the victim of a mania for purity that cascades throughout his life. The references to the Clinton-Lewinsky affair set his experience up as a kind of microcosm,[165] and yet the microcosm is not exactly right. It does not seem to me that what Zuckerman is doing is finding a kind of lab-rat to examine, not a mere isolation of the elements of the case, but a polemical and in fact tragical construction of

---

[163] Philip Roth, *The Human Stain*, 11.

[164] *Ibid*, 12.

[165] Elaine B Safer, *Mocking The Age: The Later Novels of Philip Roth* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 118.

one man's story. A tragedy of purity, a great man who falls, in the classical sense, due to a fault within himself. The Clintonian parallels, though regularly highlighted,[166] provide a kind of wider context. That historicising of the near-present Roth talked about, rather than any direct analogy. After all, Bill Clinton in effect committed perjury. Bill Clinton did not face a cascading series of crises. Bill Clinton was not the hero of a tragedy. And importantly, while this is a campus novel, and while the relationship with Faunia Farley is a sex scandal of a kind (certainly made so by Delphina Roux), the inciting incident is not sex-and-power at all, but concerns the racial politics of language:

> The class consisted of fourteen students. Coleman had taken attendance at the beginning of the first several lectures so as to learn their names. As there were still two names that failed to elicit a response by the fifth week into the semester, Coleman, in the sixth week, opened the session by asking, "Does anyone know these people? Do they exist or are they spooks?"[167]

This simple question – the word 'spooks' is an anachronistic racial slur, referring to African Americans – sets off affront in the two former absentee students in Silk's class, and thence cascade the horrors of his later life.

After Iris' death, and after Coleman reads to himself from his manuscript, *Spooks*, a kind of sanity returns. A sanity which is, Zuckerman realises, the result of an affair. An affair with Faunia Farley, who proves a kind of regenerative and idyllic figure (at least at first, at least in part), and through whom Silk is able to access a self before scandal:

> Before becoming a revolutionary dean, before becoming a serious classics professor…he had been not only a studious boy but a charming and seductive boy as well. Excited. Mischievous. A bit

[166] Even in the title of the book, which in one sense is a kind of lewd reference to the infamous semen stain on Lewinsky's dress.

[167] Philip Roth, *The Human Stain*, 6.

> demonic even, a snub-nosed, goat-footed Pan. Once upon a time, before the serious things took over completely.[168]

The regeneration then, is linked not only to his life before the 'spooks' catastrophe, but to his pre-marital, pre-career self; even then to his black self.

The twist, as it were, of the novel is that Coleman Silk is in fact black, and has been passing for Jewish his entire career. There is not room here to discuss the complicated ways in which this links both to racial politics, and to the classical-tragic structure of the novel, beyond noting that the 'human stain', or the original sin, or the tragic flaw in Silk, is linked to his own expunging of his racial past, his racial identity. He wipes his background clean, and in so doing leaves himself open to, of all things, a charge of racism. It is not only that there is a deep and almost comical irony in a very successful black professor being driven from the university by the anti-racist (or, to use the popular nineties term, 'politically correct') zeal, but also that Silk in his own way has attempted to escape an unescapable reality. There is a metaphysical schema at play here. Recall that the epigraph opening the novel is a quote from the *Oedipus Rex:* 'what rite of purification?'… 'By banishing a man, or of expiation of blood by blood'. Of course Oedipus' own attempts to forestall his predicted fate lead to his demise (in one of the famous accidents of literature, he marries his mother and kills his father, a plot one could see Roth doing rather a lot with).

Zuckerman makes Silk in his own image: the individualistic artist who escapes from racial identity to forge himself, his own life standing in for the artist's construction.[169] And this is the deeper characterisation of Silk's 'insanity' after his scandal, the irony gets to him:

---

[168] *Ibid*, 25.

[169] Convincingly argued by Larry Schwartz, 'Erasing Race in Philip Roth's The Human Stain', *Philip Roth Studies* 7, no 1 (2011): p.72.

> Spooks! To be undone by a word that no one even speaks anymore. To hang him on that was, for Coleman, to banalize everything – the elaborate clockwork of his lie, the beautiful calibration of his deceit, *everything*. The ridiculous trivialization of this masterly performance that had been his seemingly conventional, singularly subtle life – a life of little, if anything excessive on the surface because all the excess goes into the secret. No wonder the accusation of racism blew him sky high. No wonder *all* the accusations blew him sky high. His crime exceeded anything and everything they wanted to lay on him. He said "spooks," he has a girlfriend half his age – it's all kid stuff. Such pathetic, such petty, such ridiculous transgressions, so much high school yammering to a man who, on his trajectory outward, had, among other things, done what he'd had to do to his mother, to go there and, in behalf of his heroic conception of his life, to tell her, "It's over. This love affair is over. You're no longer my mother and never were."[170]

In his betrayal of his mother, and in the particular use of the phrase 'this love affair', we see the Oedipal reality of Silk's downfall. Not Oedipal in the Freudian sense – though of course that is the joke ('love affair') – but in the actual classical sense, the fault in the man brings him down. But under Zuckerman's eye this fault is also a kind of heroism, a drive to enshrine the self above the outward signifiers of identity.

This strikes me as a powerful evocation of a tension that rides throughout Roth's work. Though only here is it placed in the life, not of a Jewish son struggling with diasporic Jewish consciousness, but of a person radically separating from his racial identity, his ethnic past. Running alongside this complex vision of the individual vis-à-vis the identity group is the polemic against puritanism. It is through tragedy that the one part of the story – the life of *this particular man* in all its complexity – runs up against Zuckerman's disgust at the 'smallness of people', the expectation (as he sees it) of purity. In bridging the two only an hysterical schema can work: an operation in plot of a fantasy of collapse, the single accusation that brings about a series of events

[170] Philip Roth, *The Human Stain*, 334-335.

leading to an enraged ex-husband running Farley and Silk off the road (this is, of course, hypothetical but it *is* the plot we are given). The over-zealous accusation of racism leads almost inexorably to ruin and death. The secret kept – which in this conception is a near artistic act of self-fulfilment – is the flaw that creates the necessary preconditions for Silk's disgrace.

Finally we have the apparent villain of the novel,[171] the cartoonish Delphine Roux. The name alone is a kind of joke: Delphine not only fitting into the spider web of classical references, but also signalling specifically the oracle at Delphi. Oracular Delphine is not a kind of theory-imposed superstition, though if we take a secular view she is perhaps the guardian of magical thinking. Even her surname 'Roux' is a homonym with 'rue', as in *to rue the day*, to regret intensely.

Delphine is the head of the languages and literature program into which classics had been absorbed by the time Coleman was teaching his final course. A hyper-educated and hyper self-conscious French professor with a continental literary education, Delphine serves as the ultimate foil to Silk, as well as a kind of exaggerated parody of the politically correct theorist who leans hypocritically on her morality as a farcical substitute for a stable sense of self. The difficulty with the portrait is that it is at once hilarious, a mess of hypocrisy and double-think, while also being so evidently an acid-drenched cartoon, such a polemically inclined caricature that her position as villain becomes effectively farcical – a kind of hatchet job. Conflicted by dual impulses towards extreme puritanism, and hypocritical self-denial, she finds herself attracted to Silk (not least because he reminds her of a professor *she* slept with in Paris) and hating that she is. An obsessive focus on her appearance and on subtle sexual signals hints at the kind

[171] This ignores the grim figure of Lester, Faunia's ex-husband and a Vietnam veteran. Unfortunately there is not space in the confines of a discussion of 'scandal' to include any substantive analysis of his function – for a discussion of both his farcical and tragic aspects see: Elaine B Safer, *Mocking The Age: The Later Novels of Philip Roth*, 119.

of prurience she is so quick to seek out in others. Take the close-third description around her meeting with Silk, about a student complaint that Euripides's *Hippoytus* was 'degrading to women':

> To this day, she continued to be disquieted by Coleman Silk's presence just to the degree that she wished for him now to be un-settled by her. Something about him always led her back to her childhood and the precocious child's fear that she is being seen through; also to the precocious child's fear that she is not being seen enough. Afraid of being exposed, dying to be seen – there's a dilemma for you. Something about him made her even second-guess her English, with which otherwise she felt wholly at ease. Whenever they were face to face, something made her think that he wanted nothing more than to tie her hands behind her back.
>
> This something was what? The way he had sexually sized her up when she first came to be interviewed in his office, or the way he had failed to sexually size her up? It had been impossible to read his reading of her, and that on a morning when she knew she had maximally deployed all her powers. She had wanted to look terrific and she did, she had wanted to be fluent and she was, she had wanted to sound scholarly and she'd succeeded, she was sure. And yet he looked at her as if she were a schoolgirl, Mr and Mrs. Inconsequential's little nobody child.
>
> Now, perhaps that was because of the plaid kilt – the miniskirt-like kilt might have made him think of a schoolgirl's uniform, especially as the person wearing it was a trim, tiny, dark-haired young woman with a small face that was almost entirely eyes and who weighed, clothes and all, barely a hundred pounds. All she'd intended, with the kilt as with the black cashmere turtleneck, black tights, and high black boots, was neither to desexualise herself by what she chose to wear (the university women she'd met so far in America seemed all too strenuously to be doing just that) nor to appear to be trying to tantalize him…When, seated across from the dean, she had crossed her legs and the flap of the kilt had fallen open, she had waited a minute or two before pulling it closed – and pulling it closed as perfunctorily as you close a wallet – only because, however young she looked, she *wasn't* a schoolgirl with a schoolgirl's fears and a schoolgirl's primness, caged in by a schoolgirl's rules. She did not wish to leave that impression any more than to give the opposite impression by allowing the flap to remain open and thereby inviting him to imagine that she meant him to gaze throughout the interview at her slim thighs in the black tights. She had tried as best she could, with the choice of

> clothing as with her manner, to impress upon him the intricate interplay of *all the forces* that came together to make her so interesting at twenty-four.[172]

This back and forth of neurotic self-analysis in a smooth, straightforward close third goes on for another three pages, until the perspective shoots back to Silk who, so very calm and rational by comparison, is recorded summing her up as, 'so carefully self-appraising and so utterly deluded.'[173] Note the change in tone, not the dialectical push-and-pull of the neurotically self-obsessed, at once narcissistic and self-loathing ('little nobody child'):

> Of course she had the credentials. But to Coleman she embodied the sort of prestigious academic crap that the Athena students needed like a hole in the head but whose appeal to the faculty second-raters would prove irresistible.[174]

In a sense Delphine is drawn well – Roth is an expert in a kind of self-conscious neuroticism – but note the disparity. Zuckerman (who we must constantly remember is crafting this story from limited information, who is in the process of *imagining* Silk's lived reality) presents Silk as purely rational, summing Delphine's internal obsessions and doubts up in two careful sentences, after five pages of tracking her at once strident and uncertain mind.

Delphine's smear campaign – not only that Silk is racist but that he is an abuser of Faunia ('an abused, illiterate woman half [his] age') – is successful.[175] Silk loses his job, the citizenry of Athena college apparently believe that he and Faunia drove off the road in a kind of sex crazed hysteria – rather than what Zuckerman claims is the truth, that Lester Farley in fact drove the two off the road in his truck. Delphine's persona might be monstrous if not first for the convincing portrait of her neuroses, and secondly the way these sympathetic-if-

---

[172] Philip Roth, *The Human Stain*, 185-186.
[173] *Ibid*, 190.
[174] *Ibid*, 190.
[175] *Ibid*, 38.

frustrating contradictions are turned into sheer absurdity by the time she writes her personal ad intended for the New York Review:

> The problem confronting her as she sat alone at the computer long after dark, the only person left in Barton Hall, unable to leave her office, unable to face one more night in her apartment without even a cat for company – the problem was how to include in her ad, no matter how subtly coded, something that essentially said, "Whites only need apply." If it were discovered at Athena that it was she who had specified such an exclusion – no, that would not do for a person ascending so rapidly through the Athena academic hierarchy. Yet she had no choice but to ask for a photograph, even though she knew – knew from trying as hard as she could to think of everything, to be naïve about nothing, on the basis of just her brief life as a woman on her own to take into account how men could behave – that there was nothing to stop someone sufficiently sadistic or perverse from sending a photograph designed to mislead *specifically* in the matter of race.[176]

And here-in lies what seems to damn Delphine: a sheer hypocrisy. In fact, a racism much worse than the unknowing use of the word 'spooks', and (as the near stream of consciousness rolls on) an utter contempt for the enlightened men of the college: '…all of them so earnest and so emasculated.'[177] Delphine's evident attraction to Silk is of course doubly ironic. Not only is she like the playground bully with a crush, attacking someone because of her own attraction, she is scared of exactly what Coleman Silk is, a man who is hiding his race. *Whites only need apply.* As she sits at her desk in the darkling college, she seems to strike off almost every kind of man she encounters: 'A French woman, even a French feminist would find such [an emasculated] man disgusting. The Frenchwoman is intelligent, she's sexy, she's *truly* independent…the more of a woman she is the more the Frenchwoman *wants* the man to project his power.'[178] But the writers too ('the Hats'

[176] *Ibid*, 262-263.
[177] *Ibid*, 264.
[178] *Ibid*, 264.

as she calls them) are also fundamentally wrong, 'she cannot stand, the American I-am-the-writer type'.[179]

As an internal litany of hate – not only for men but for female professors she could not stand – rolls on Delphine figures out, in some sense, what she was seeking furiously all along, what was hinted at in the more relaxed third person during her interview with Silk about *Hippolyta*. This realisation explodes in full stream-of-consciousness:

> Seeks. All right then, *seeks*. Do as the students say – Go for it! Youthful, petite, womanly, attractive, academically successful SWF French-born scholar, Parisian background, Yale Ph.D., Mass.-based seeks…? And now just lay it on the line. Do not hide from the truth of what you are and do not hide from the truth of what you seek. A stunning, brilliant hyperorgasmic woman seeks…seeks…seeks specifically and uncompromisingly *what?*
>
> She wrote now in a rush.
>
> Mature man with backbone. Unattached. Independent. Witty-Lively. Defiant. Forthright. Well educated. Satirical spirit. Charm. Knowledge and love of great books. Well spoken and straight speaking. Trimly built. Five eight or nine. Mediterranean complexion. Green eyes preferred. Age unimportant. But must be intellectual. Graying hair acceptable, even desirable…
>
> And then, and only then, did the mythical man being summoned forth in all earnestness on the screen condense into a portrait of someone she already knew…[180]

And of course the person named is Coleman Silk. From here the famous farce ensues and Delphine accidentally sends this email not to the New York Review, but to her colleagues at Athena. This leads her, half manic and in a fit of self-denying terror, and even grief after the call that confirms Silk's death, to frame him for the email.

Delphine is an especially uncomfortable aspect of *The Human Stain*. As Safer argues, there is a kind of exaggeration in her behaviour that severs readerly feeling for her. This seems the intention, her hypocrisies are so many. Not only is she first in line with a pitchfork, but she is also a liar, a sender of threatening notes, an internalised

[179] She goes on to taxonomise these, see *Ibid*, 265-266.

[180] *Ibid*, 273-274.

misogynist, and even a closet racist. The characterisation of Delphine is an enumeration of hypocritical faults. A cartoon of the shrill bully, she uses politics to bludgeon others while scrambling to construct a self that cannot maintain internal coherence. And yet she is a pitiable figure, with her grief at Silk's death, her wild-eyed desire to connect with *someone.* She is more sympathetic, I think, than Safer suggests. It seems that Zuckerman is involved in a kind of creative cognitive dissonance. He is after all is constructing these scenes (it must be surmised) almost entirely from his imagination – and of course he is, he's a novelist. Delphine is made into a cartoon, into 'Roth's device for a sweeping commentary on contemporary society'.[181] And yet the contemporary reader cannot help but see her as both well intentioned *and* deeply flawed.

Of course we cannot *know* this character. All we have is the fictional representation of an already fictional person. The real is so very hard to get to, and Zuckerman is not a mere window-pane, he editorialises from the start. Even the idea that the note about Faunia came from her is contestable. There is Silk's certainty, and the handwriting expert, but as Parker Royal argues, 'Zuckerman's narrative never establishes Roux's complicity'.[182] All we really have is the tragic schema Zuckerman has set up, the villainy Silk sees in her. And yet the real character, it seems to me, while farcical and pathological in her contradictions, is not so far from a typical Roth-hero. A Roth hero is neurotic and obsessive and usually very successful, a person of (at least often) real importance in a community whose sheer, raw humanness is their undoing, or what risks their undoing. This describes Delphine Roux also – she puts me half in mind of Eliot's line at the end of the

[181] Elaine B Safer, Mocking The Age: The Later Novels of Philip Roth, 121.

[182] Derek Parker Royal, 'Plotting the Frames of Subjectivity: Identity, Death, and Narrative in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*', 120.

'Preludes'. Perhaps not 'infinitely gentle', but certainly 'some infinitely suffering thing'.[183]

The critical problem here is the contradiction in the very clear slant of the narrative. Silk is complicated and masculine, and ultimately the victim of a perversive hysteria. A public rite of purification which not only ends his career but destroys his reputation, his wife, and eventually results in his death. The novel is a nightmare: what if *everything* went wrong. What if the spirit of accusation brought upon the innocent man drove his world so out of order it destroyed him? And yet Zuckerman, bitterly impotent, watching the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal from his television, is not himself omniscient. Zuckerman never has been. His conflicting creation of Delphine – a character whose complexity seems to shine through the acid-tipped pen, the character assignation – shows exactly that the accusatory side of the scandal is human too. It seems that while Zuckerman himself creates a Manichean narrative structured around good and bad,[184] the actual world of these characters, even the seeming villain, is so inextricably complicated, so morally confused, that he cannot even manage really to smear his own creation. As Zuckerman himself says to Delphine Roux:

> Because we don't know, do we? Everyone knows... How what happens the way it does? What underlies the anarchy of the train of events, the uncertainties, the mishaps, the disunity, the shocking irregularities that define human affairs? […] What we know is that, in an uncliched way, nobody knows anything. You can't know anything. The things you know you don't know. Intention? Motive? Consequence? Meaning? All that we don't know is astonishing. Even more astonishing is what passes for knowing.[185]

[183] 'Preludes by T.S Eliot.' Poetry Foundation. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44214/preludes-56d22338dc954

[184] Though here reversed from the wisdom of the time, here suggesting instead that the good are the realists, who know presidents have penises, who do not bowdlerize the world.

[185] Philip Roth, *The Human Stain,* 208-209.

Indeed, we reply. Not even Zuckerman knows. There is no guilt, no innocence, no knowing. There is only the telling, the imposition of a point of view. The writing is a hostile act.

If *The Human Stain* is a nightmare, a fever-dream of how a scandal could metastasise into a tragedy, if it stands as a warning and a polemic, then *The Death of the Body* is in important ways its opposite. A day-dream and a fantasy of how it might all go right. A dream of smooth sailing, and lessons learned. The professor keeps his life, and his career is saved by the wife he betrays. Its telling too, while boldly narrated – Stead's most explicitly metafictional third novel – sits in extreme contrast to Zuckerman. Here a far from impotent narrator travels around Europe and writes in London. He looks back on Auckland and on the pieces of a drama which have not yet worked themselves out. There is a note, there is a dead body, there is a professor. The novel is both the story of how these fit together and how the artist makes them fit together.

What concerns me is the campus aspect of the novel – the affair with Louise Lamont, the ensuing crisis, the resolution. Let us begin with the narrator, who shifts and teases, who addresses the reader directly, who narrates his process. Think of those forking paths in *The Counterlife*, the options are all open. The narrator's story, his role in the story, is to choose:

> I introduce myself by looking out. I introduce myself only to dismiss myself as of no consequence. I'm a travelling salesman, an itinerant bard, a newsman in search of a happy ending. I'm the life-and-soul of the party-of-one. I'm the voice of the Story.[186]

The voice of the story is both a character himself – he travels, he meets Uta who becomes a kind of 'muse' and a kind of 'moralist', who advises and critiques his drafts as they come – and a kind of personification of

[186] C.K. Stead, *The Death of The Body*, 1.

authorship. Not a voice-of-god in his omnipotence, but a voice from *out there*, reporting almost from the other side of the narrative veil. And, not being omnipotent, this voice calls himself Philip. We come to think this may be Harry's friend, the journalist Phil Gardner, when he hints again at this possibility as the novel ends.[187] Although the narrator is careful to lead us away from puzzle-solving, to set himself up as first-and-foremost simply voice:

> Have I name? To be honest I have not. I am, as I've told you, the voice of the Story. But if you don't believe a voice can exist without a name, call me Ishmael, or Philip, or take whatever name you find on the cover of the book. These won't be correct, but if they silence your anxieties and permit you to listen, then let them serve. In the end an identity will be forged. Or it won't. That will be for you to decide.[188]

The inherent ambiguity of the narrator leaves the novel open and in a kind of flux, though never forgetting the importance of telling the story. In this sense the metafiction here is unique in that, while we do loop back to the room in London with the Matisse print, to the blue folder called 'Story', and to that hint of a name, the concern of the narrator is putting one thing before the other ('things have to come one at a time'), developing a plot which resolves.[189] The promise of the second paragraph always in sight, that search for a happy ending.

Harry Butler and Louise Lamont are introduced as lovers, though the narrator circles around the point. Their introduction suggests something of the tonal balance of the novel – a kind of quaint, faintly ingratiating tone, followed by a blunt truth, stated baldly:

> I begin in Auckland in October – a recent October. Harry Butler is having lunch with Louise Lamont. Harry Butler is the professor of philosophy…She's a post-graduate research student. She's also what in earlier times you would have called Harry's mistress.

---

[187] *Ibid*, 206.

[188] *Ibid*, 1-2.

[189] *Ibid*, 5.

> These days if you were trying to avoid that word but still wanted to describe their relationship with a sort of old-world decorum, you might say they went to bed together, but that won't do either. They've very seldom been together in a bed. Mostly (as Louise would put it) they fuck on the floor.[190]

The narrative perspective jumps out, not only in the placing of the harsher, blunter dialect in Louisa's mouth (which makes sense, she is younger than Harry), but in racing to suggest a kind of schema of university people, or more specifically women at the university. Louisa is sexually liberated, young in around 1986 when the novel was published, and sitting at a historical juncture – between the post 1960s sexual revolution, and the 'second wave' of feminism.[191] The narrator considers how he *might* describe her, before giving a sense impression – telling us what she is similar to, and what she is not, zeroing in, the aesthetic mode of the novel at large:

> Is there any need to describe Louise in detail? I think she could be any good-looking, lively, intelligent young woman. Verlaine says in the poem about his recurring dream, "Is she brunette, blonde or red-head? – I'm not sure". Middle height – anywhere at all, in fact, between Julietta Massina and Vanessa Redgrave. Fashionably dressed, but casual, so you can see a senior research student is one of the things she might be. Would you find her in any anti-tour rally if the Springboks came to new Zealand? Certainly. Would she do a turn at the Rape Crisis Centre? Unlikely – it doesn't seem like her scene. Would she join the Philosophy Department Women's Collective? No she wouldn't. But she does believe in her freedom. Like so many women before her, Louise believes she belongs to the first wave of the truly emancipated.[192]

---

[190] *Ibid*, 5.

[191] Terms like these are, of course, in flux and debated. But here I take 'second wave' to mean a kind of activist feminism that Roth and Stead were reacting to, that focussed specifically on gendered rights, patriarchy, and reproduction – see for instance Martha Rampton, 'Four Waves of Feminism', *Pacific Magazine,* 25 October 2015, accessed 28 July, 2021, https://www.pacificu.edu/magazine/four-waves-feminism. Particularly: 'The second wave was increasingly theoretical, based on a fusion of neo-Marxism and psycho-analytical theory, and began to associate the subjugation of women with broader critiques of patriarchy, capitalism, normative heterosexuality, and the woman's role as wife and mother. Sex and gender were differentiated—the former being biological, and the later a social construct that varies culture-to-culture and over time.'

[192] C.K. Stead, *The Death of the Body*, 8.

The passage is very nearly clear about a feature of Stead's writing that is present near constantly in his fiction: the dream woman upon whom one projects. There is almost no need to describe Louise, she is generically attractive, her size is generic, her political commitments are generic. She is a stand-in, she is in effect *the mistress* – though an updated one, an educated one, equipped not with cliched vengeance, but an education, and eventually the selfhood to move on.

The key to the novel's happy ending is here in its set-up, though subtly. Harry's wife Claire is a convert to Sufism and now 'at least inwardly, changed her name to Sophia'.[193] The narrator wonders about the rocking movement of her chanting cross legged on the floor: 'Could that rocking movement even be somehow interlocked with the different but not unrelated rhythm on the carpeted floor of the small seminar room?'[194] The answer to which is yes, and in that interlocking, in those not unrelated rhythms, lies the key to the novel – how to bring the pieces of the family structure back together from their presently fractured state. The fracture is a result of Claire's inattention –'those excesses of "not being" which have sometimes invaded her lately' – or rather the increasing attention to her new found faith and her 'Path to Perfection'.[195] The fracture is caused by Harry's inattention too, his disillusionment: 'Harry's thoughts about Claire are often despairing and occasionally bitter, they shouldn't be allowed to determine what we see. Harry at this moment is no objective witness'.[196]

Harry is no objective witness. Nor is the voice – the narrator – nor are we. One of the curious tensions in the book is the reader's tendency to pass by the narrator's obiter as elaborated tonal setting, when in fact it helps determine exactly how to read the novel. Which is to say that one, or rather I, expect a certain story from Harry and

[193] *Ibid*, 9.
[194] *Ibid*, 9.
[195] *Ibid*, 12.
[196] *Ibid*, 12.

Claire. Claire has lost interest, and is rather a weaker character: entranced by her guru, she has forgotten family life. In return Harry grows dissatisfied and their marriage unravels. There is an element of truth to this – but Harry is also conflicted, his mind is on other things. Or perhaps his body. Harry's philosophical investigation in 'the mind/body problem' functions a little like Claire's religion – it seems to make him less alive to the practical world of his domestic structure, it seems to allow for a near deterministic floating through his own story. He has feelings, of course, he is not an automaton, but he seems not to reflect either pragmatically or ethically on his situation. Take the parallels in Harry's affair with Claire (before they married), and his affair now with Louise:

> …in Claire's kitchen while the gas jet hissed under the kettle, and Harry's head fell forward on her lap. It was the head of Harry Butler that Claire took in her arms, almost as if it didn't belong to his body. And his flat – even crass, if you want to see it as Uta did – statement "I'd like to go to bed with you" was turned aside with a laugh. Had Harry always been first and foremost a head to Claire? Even a professorial head? And hadn't his intellectual effort been directed always towards solving the Mind/Body paradox by saying the separation was unreal?
>
> When Louise Lamont leaned over the back of his chair and cupped her hands around the package between his legs, was she further from Harry's head than Claire was with his head cradled in her arms? Or was she nearer?[197]

The floating head of the academic, though, finds itself suddenly nearing the chopping block. And he will need to be rescued. A matter of context is also a matter of coincidence – Stead himself has acknowledged that the Mervyn Thompson affair was on his mind when he wrote the novel. Thompson was a drama lecturer at the University of Auckland who in 1984, after being accused of harassment, was abducted by campus feminists and left tied to a tree, his car smeared with the word

[197] *Ibid*, 85.

'rapist'.[198] Not quite Coleman Silk's bitter end, and for rather a different cause, but nonetheless a dramatic incident on the campus and one which Thompson felt ruined his life: 'I sometimes think I died in 1984 and that all subsequent activity has been the writhing of a corpse.'[199]

It is this kind of fate the reader, this reader, had in mind for Harry Butler. Or at least an all-out scandal, the loss of a job perhaps. It is also what the feminists from the 'Women's Collective' who in effect attempt first to convert Louise, and then to misuse a note of Harry's – a note in effect breaking off their relationship over concerns about the imbalance between the two, concerns the relationship was not healthy for Louise. The representatives of the Women's Collective surreptitiously take it while Louise is on the phone to Harry. The presentation of the feminist students, 'the two in overalls'[200], comprises a good deal more than 'caricatures'.[201] The description of the two at Louise's door is indicative of the narratorial attitude:

> They were members of the Philosophy Department Women's Collective. She saw them often around the corridors of the Department sticking up posters headed "Women need Women". They both wore their hair cut spiky short. They were often in boots and blue jeans, or as now, overalls and T-shirts. They were about the same height – not much more than five feet – and one had lately put on a lot of weight so her overalls seemed to balloon out, up from the ankles at the back and down from neck at the front.
>
> [….]
>
> Les did the talking. She moved about the room, using a sort of bold boy's voice, louder than necessary, accompanying it with violent, or at least rough, movements of hand and head, like an actress playing the part of Rosalind pretending to be a boy in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.[202]

---

[198] Judith Dell Panny, *Plume of Bees*, 107.

[199] *Ibid*, 107.

[200] C.K. Stead, *The Death of The Body*, 161.

[201] Judith Dell Panny, *Plume of Bees*, 108.

[202] C.K. Stead, *The Death of The Body,* 161-162.

This sort of characterisation is so broad as to be faintly embarrassing. The characters may have been intended to be 'witty',[203] but are really thinly drawn bundles of tropes – spiky hair, weight gain, masculine speech. This is not helped by the fact that none of Stead, the narrator, or Louise even manage to cite the correct Shakespeare comedy: Rosalind cross-dresses in *As You Like It,* not *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. An embarrassing mistake for a literature professor. It is worth mentioning that the narrator is aware of the potential offence – Uta takes offence at the characterisation. Though the narrator points out cleverly that they 'call themselves dykes'.[204] The interaction should be noted: an attempt to draw Les and Maxie into a light-hearted aware construction. But to my ear at least it falls rather flat, they remain simplistically drawn, even if the narrator, or Uta (or at least Stead) is aware of this.

Awkward characterisation aside, Les and Maxie serve a structural function. They beckon the scandal. And like Delphine – note, the complexity with which that university feminist was drawn by comparison, Les and Maxine never breathe on the page – they serve as the mob in the wings, catalysts for social condemnation, 'Les and Maxie struck'. An extract from Harry's letter is dispersed around campus with the note: 'DO YOU WANT TO FIGURE IN HARRY BUTLER'S DREAM LANDSCAPE? OR DO YOU THINK PROFESSORS WHO HARASS THEIR STUDENTS SEXUALLY SHOULD BE SACKED? WOMEN: MAKE YOUR FEELINGS KNOWN'.[205]

In this note – with its capitals, with its lack of consideration for the personal context between Louise and Harry, or for the fact it was stolen, or for the complexities around the word 'harass' – we see a railing against puritanism reminiscent of Roth. A sense that moral

[203] Judith Dell Panny, *Plume of Bees*, 107.
[204] C.K. Stead, *The Death of The Body*, 187.
[205] *Ibid*, 190-191.

outrage has become a mode or a fashion; that Les and Midge (and Maxine) are forgetting the individuals in favour of a collective political point. One this novel constructs as effectively prurient and puritanical.

By Shakespeare's rules, tragedy ends in death and comedy ends in marriage (a statement true of both *As You Like It* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) – and *The Death of the Body*, despite its title, is a comedy. Or rather in this case, the reassertion of a marriage-bond. Harry's affair with a student, Harry's hastily written note, and Harry's job have brought him to the edge of scandal and he is saved by something not far from a *deus ex machina*, though one the reader is set up for: the narrator is in search of the right happy ending.

Harry arrives home to see his full letter open and on the floor and Claire in her shrine repeating the mantra 'I am not this body', and Harry 'took a suitcase from above the wardrobe and began packing.'[206] At which point the narrator and Uta's dialogue resumes and she objects – objects to a sense that the novel is a 'tragedy', though 'not in the sense of Shakespeare…she meant something regrettable that shouldn't have been allowed to happen.'[207] The notion of something not being 'allowed' to happen is a layered one in a metafictional novel like this, after all it is the voice who allows or does not allow. And this is where the paths of the stories – the voice's story and Harry's – are no longer strictly divided, and the answer to Uta's question 'How do you know so much?'[208] could be either that the voice is Phil, and was there, and knows the broad strokes. Or the answer could be that the voice really is totally in control – he knows because this or the other is what the 'Story' demands. And Uta's disappointment in Claire's seeming weakness shows up in the denouement's seemingly changed direction:

> So when Claire emerged from her chanting and told him to put his clothes back where they belonged and not to be

[206] *Ibid*, 194.
[207] *Ibid*, 200.
[208] *Ibid*, 198.

> melodramatic, Harry didn't hesitate, even for a moment. A great surge of relief, and of gratitude, washed over him.[209]

Claire claims the note was sent to her, since it has no name, a simple solution that provides a sufficient bulwark against the swelling of a scandal. 'Claire has won', and 'Harry has come to heel'. This is the happy ending – the fantasy of escape, the crisis which only contributes to one's character.

Writing is a hostile act. There is no way to craft a narrative without the imposition of a point of view, the imposition of a mode of looking at the world communicated to the reader only by the voice on the page. It is not reasonable to attempt a blind reading of either, ignoring that they come to us now in a world hostile to their impositions – whether the pity of Coleman Silk, or the 'wry' and happy end for Harry Butler – both provoke our sense of power narratives, our sense of how a scandal should be told, who is owed our sympathy. But art like life does not make much room for what we would ideally like, and who we would ideally like to hear from. In each is a complicated relationship to the telling much beyond mere provocation.

The Human Stain pities Coleman Silk and rallies against puritan ethics, what Zuckerman takes as unreality. And yet the mouthpiece for much of the novel's hysterical puritanism comes to us as an increasingly complex and sad character, moved by motives much like any Rothian hero, though viewed from the other side of the very high wall of political commitment. And Stead, with a skip and a wink, leaves Harry Butler wondering if his new found sense of responsibility – or is it fear? – is progress or 'the death of the body'. The commitments, utterly different in tone, that Stead and Roth share to raw reality are practiced here not only through acts of telling, acts of shaping and crafting, but through the perspective the novels violently chase: the reality of the

[209] *Ibid*, 202.

body, the perceived unreality of puritan demands on moral acts. In each always the sense that one cannot know – the voice in *The Death of the Body* cannot even be sure what his characters look like, how much we should trust, what counts as the death of the body. Zuckerman's rage is channelled into a furious and provocative tragedy, where the accused becomes the victim, an accuser an embattled villain – but what he comes back to is doubt, outrage at the sentiment 'everybody knows'. The reality of narrating scandal is doubt. And doubt is a scandal, but it is also real.

Bibliography

Bailey, Blake. *Philip Roth: The Biography* (London: Penguin Random House, 2021).

Banville, John. 'A Master of Hidden Things', *New York Review of Books*, October 24, 2019, accessed 28 July, 2021,

https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/10/24/elizabeth-bowen-master-hidden-things/

Barber, Giles. “A Philosopher and His Books.” *The Linacre Journal* 3, (1999): 17–26.

Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

Brooks, Peter. *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).
Charters, Ann. The Story and Its Writer (New York: Bedford, 2003).

Calder, Alex. *The Settler’s Plot: How Stories Take Place in New Zealand* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2011).

Didion, Joan. *Let Me Tell You What I Mean* (Dublin: Harper Collins, 2021).
Didion, Joan. Slouching Towards Bethlehem (London: 4th Estate, 1968).

Eliot, George. ‘The Natural History of German Life,’ *Westminster Review* LXVI (1856): 51-79.

Eliot, T.S. ‘Burnt Norton’ in *Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001).

Eliot, T.S. 'The Wasteland.’ Poetry Foundation https://www.poetry foundation.org/poems/47311/the-waste-land

Grumberg, Karen. ‘Necessary Wounds and the Humiliation of Galut in Roth’s The Counterlife and Operation Shylock,’ *Philip Roth Studies* 5, no 1 (2009): 35-59.

Hendley, Clark W. 'An Old Form Revitalized: Philip Roth’s Ghost Writer and The Bildungsroman,' *Studies in the Novel* 16, no 1 (1984): 87–100.

Ionescu, Arleen. ‘Pas-de-noms/Plus de noms. Derrida and Blanchot’, *Word and Text A Journal of Literary Studies and Linguistics* 1, no. 1 (2011): 59-69.

Jones, Lawrence. ‘The Novel’, in *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English*, ed. Terry Strum (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1998).

Joyce, James. *Finnegan’s Wake*, (London: Faber, 1975).

Frank Kermode, “Apocalyptic Opacity.” *London Review of Books*, 24 September 1992, accessed 28 July, 2021 https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v14/n18/frank-kermode/apocalyptic-opacity

Kremer, Lillian S. ‘Philip Roth’s Self-Reflexive Fiction’, *Modern Language Studies* 28, no 3 (1998): 57-72.

Levy, Paul. ‘The Text as Homeland: A Reading of Philip Roth’s “The Counterlife” and “Operation Shylock”, *Studies in American Jewish Literature* (1981-) 21 (2002): 61-71.

Mailer, Norman. *The Spooky Art: Some Thoughts on Writing* (New York: Random House, 2003).

Margetts, Jordan "I see you, CK Stead." The Spinoff, 28 November, 2020, accessed 28 July, 2021, https://thespinoff.co.nz/books/28-11-2020/i-see-you-ck-stead/

Metcalf, Stephen. 'If Philip Roth: The Biography Leaves You Hating Its Subject, Thank Blake Bailey.' *Los Angeles Times*, 2 April 2021, accessed 28 July, 2021, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/books/story/2021-04-02/philip-roth-biography-review-blake-bailey-exposed-him.

Nabokov, Vladimir. S*peak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (London: Penguin, 1969).

Newlin, James. 'Living on the Edge: Deconstruction, the Limits of Readability, and Philip Roth's The Counterlife', *Philip Roth Studies* 8, no 2 (2012): 161-177.

O'Hara, Frank. 'Mayakovsky,' in *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara,* ed. Donald M. Allen (Oakland: University of California Press, 1995).

Ozick, Cynthia. 'What Henry James Knew', in *Letters of Intent,* (London: Atlantic Books, 2017).

Ozick, Cynthia. 'Who Owns Anne Frank', in *Letters of Intent*, (London: Atlantic Books, 2017).

Panny, Judith Dell. *Plume of bees: a literary biography of C.K. Stead* (Auckland: Cape Catley, 2009).

Rampton, Martha. 'Four Waves of Feminism', *Pacific Magazine*, 25 October 2015, accessed 28 July, 2021, https://www.pacificu.edu/magazine/four-waves-feminism

Roth, Philip. *Goodbye Columbus and Five Short Stories* (London: Vintage, 1959).

Roth, Philip. *My Life as a Man* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985).
Roth, Philip. Philip Roth at 80: A Celebration (New York: Library of America, 2014).

Roth, Philip. *Reading Myself and Others* (London: Vintage, 2016).
Roth, Philip, 'The Art of Fiction No. 84' in *The Paris Review*, Fall, 1984, accessed 28 July, 2021, https://theparisreview.org/interviews/2957/the-art-of-fiction-no-84-philip-roth

Roth, Philip. *The Counterlife* (London: Vintage, 1986).

Roth, Philip, *The Ghost Writer* (New York: Vintage, 1975).

Roth, Philip, *The Human Stain* (London: Vintage, 2000).

Royal, Derek Parker. 'Plotting the Frames of Subjectivity: Identity, Death, and Narrative in Philip Roth's The Human Stain', *Contemporary Literature* 47, no 1 (2006): 114-140.

Safer, Elaine B. *Mocking The Age: The Later Novels of Philip Roth* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006).

Schwartz, Larry. 'Erasing Race in Philip Roth's The Human Stain', *Philip Roth Studies* 7, no 1 (2011): 65-81.

Slivka, Jennifer A. ‘History and the “I” Trapped in the Middle: Negotiating the Past in Roth’s The Ghost Writer and The Plot Against America’, *Philip Roth Studies* 8, no 2 (2012):127-144.

Stead, C.K. *All Visitors Ashore* (London: Random House, 1984).

Stead, C.K. *Collected Poems: 1951-2006* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2006).

Stead, C.K. *The End of The Century at The End of The World* (Auckland: Harper Collins, 1992).

Stead, C.K. *The Death of the Body* (London: Harper Collins, 1986).

Stead, C.K. *That Derrida Whom I Derided Died* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2018).

Stead, C.K. *You Have A Lot to Lose* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2020).

T.S Eliot. ’Preludes.' Poetry Foundation. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44214/preludes-56d22338dc954

Thompson, E.P. T*he Making of The English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968).

Woolf, Virginia. 'The Mark on the Wall,' in *Monday or Tuesday* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company Inc, 1921).