

Philip Roth's Counterlives

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Just one year after Philip Roth's announcement that he was retiring from fiction making, Claudia Roth Pierpont's *Roth Unbound* offers a review of his long and versatile career as a writer of subversive fictions and counterlives.

Reviewed: *Roth Unbound: A Writer and His Books*, Claudia Roth Pierpont, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013, 368 pages, \$27.00.

Half a century of elaborate impersonation

Philip Roth has remarked that he regards writing as “the transformation, through an elaborate impersonation, of a personal emergency into a public act.” In *Roth Unbound*, an examination of Roth's development as a writer, *New Yorker* staff writer Claudia Roth Pierpont (no relation to her subject) traces the inner workings of this particular art of transformation in one of its ablest practitioners.

Her survey is well-timed. After 31 books, Roth announced last year that he is done with the frustrations and toils of fiction-making. His retirement occasions Pierpont's review of a half-century career that has been remarkably daring in its reach and exceptional in its versatility.

Roth Unbound, which addresses Roth's life only insofar as it is grist to his literary mill, opens on a biographical note. Roth was born into a Newark, New Jersey, family of half-acclulturated Jewish middle-class New Deal Democrats, the second-generation son of an insurance man who dedicated himself, as the author would later say, to “survivorship, survivorhood, survivalism.”

After studying at Bucknell University and the University of Chicago in the 1950s, Roth absorbed an invaluable lesson from Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud, authors by then well-launched in their literary careers: parochial Jewish family life could supply the raw material for fiction “as valid,” as Roth put it, “as Hemingway's Paris or Fitzgerald's Long Island.” He too, to borrow Bellow's phrase, could make himself “a Columbus of the near-at-hand.”

This discovery bore its first fruits in 1959, with Roth's debut story collection *Goodbye, Columbus*, and its tales of Jews straining to adjust to American life in flux. “At twenty-six,” Bellow noted in his *Commentary* review, “he is skillful, witty, and energetic and performs like a virtuoso.” But the book's acerbic display of the philistine vulgarities of suburban middle-class Jews (Roth takes “Jewish” and “middle-class” as synonyms) earned *Goodbye, Columbus*

reproaches from other quarters. At a Yeshiva University symposium in 1962, Roth was shocked by the opening question: “Mr. Roth, would you write the same stories you’ve written if you were living in Nazi Germany?”

Moral rage into comic art

As a child of the 50s—the Age of Conformity as Irving Howe called it—Roth tells us (in an interview with himself) that he first saw writing “as a religious calling and literature as a sort of sacrament.” In the self-celebrating 60s, that demythologizing decade, he would break with literary decorum and piety.

Not surprisingly, then, *Portnoy’s Complaint*, Roth’s subversive novel in the form of a young patient’s lewd monologue to his psychoanalyst, was greeted on its appearance in 1969 with even greater outrage. An editorial in the *New York Times*, echoing the shock of many readers and critics, claimed that the book “drowns its literary merits in revolting sex excesses.” Gershom Scholem warned that Roth had issued “the book for which all anti-Semites have been praying.” But for Roth, who once described satire as “moral rage transformed into comic art,” the indignation merely confirmed his sense of the narrow-mindedness from which he had set out to break free. He finally wearied of explaining that *Portnoy* was not him. “A novel in the guise of a confession,” he wrote, “was received and judged by any number of readers as a confession in the guise of a novel.”

Neither Roth’s frank focus on sexual desire and erotic abandon as a subject, nor his exercises in satire and vaudeville (as in his 1971 book, *Our Gang*, which took aim at Richard Nixon), dissipated much. But Pierpont shows that, with the novels that would center on the characters David Kepesh and Peter Tarnopol in the 1970s, and then with the exquisitely plotted Nathan Zuckerman novels in the 1980s, Roth began to blend comic ingenuity with fierce argumentation, acid irony with poignant tenderness.

He also began to turn outward, toward the America of *With malice toward none; with charity for all*, by more strenuously strapping personal drama to national drama. The turn culminated in Roth’s American Trilogy: *American Pastoral* (1997), *I Married a Communist* (1999), and *The Human Stain* (2000). Not unjustly did the critic Greil Marcus call Roth “the Tocqueville of the American heart.”

Not that Roth lost the din of the private in the cacophony of the public. In eavesdropping on the great unfinished project of American self-invention, Roth’s ear for vernacular speech, for what Zuckerman calls “the jumpy beat of American English,” captured a series of touchy characters chastened by botched love affairs, driven mad by their erotic appetites, or caught between filial loyalty and aggressive self-assertion. These are the self-fashioning, ego-defending men that Roth calls, in *The Human Stain*, “pioneers of the I.” Some are neurotic sons trapped in what Zuckerman’s brother, in *The Counterlife* (1986), describes as “the Oedipal swamp.” Others, Jews without Judaism, are flawed strivers who try to appease the world or to defy it. In Roth’s late quartet of short novels—*Everyman*, *Indignation*, *The Humbling* and *Nemesis*—aging men, torqued by grief and defeat, fulminate against their decrepitude and impotence.

In each case, Pierpont shows how doggedly Roth follows the fissures of human brokenness and contradiction. In *I Married a Communist*, Roth has an old teacher give Zuckerman his credo:

Even should you choose to write in the simplest way, à la Hemingway, the task remains to impart the nuance, to elucidate the complication, to imply the contradiction. Not to erase the contradiction, not to deny the contradiction, but to see where, within the contradiction, lies the tormented human being. To allow for the chaos, to let it in.

Zuckerman finds himself persuaded: “It’s all error. . . . Isn’t that what you’ve been telling me? There’s only error. There’s the heart of the world. Nobody finds his life. That *is* life.” Roth’s early solipsism has here given way to the humilities of fallibility.

Counter-lives and counter-histories

In an especially perceptive look at Roth’s preoccupation with doubles and alter egos (most on display in 1993’s *Operation Shylock*), Pierpont picks out a German term that Roth borrows from the poet Heinrich Heine: *Maskenfreiheit*, or the freedom conferred by masks. The troupe of actors, impersonators, and surrogates that Roth makes use of—alter egos like Alex Portnoy, Nathan Zuckerman, David Kepesh—allow him to explore not just counter-lives but counter-histories: What if Anne Frank had made it to America (*The Ghost Writer*)? What if Kafka had survived his tuberculosis and emigrated to America, to become a Hebrew teacher (Roth’s essay “Looking at Kafka”)? What if Franklin Roosevelt had lost his bid for a third term in 1940 to Charles Lindbergh (*The Plot Against America*)? What if a polio epidemic had struck Newark in 1944 (*Nemesis*)?

This preoccupation opens directly onto Roth’s fealty to Israel—an allegiance he describes as “dense with sentiment,” and which he explores in his novels *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock*. “Who better than the Jews who went to Palestine to show this theme?” he tells Pierpont. “They changed their language, they changed their names, they became farmers, they even changed the shape of their bodies.” What more vivid example of counter-lives, of a people who refuse the fetters of history, could be served up?

And yet as Roth shifted from *I* to *we*, he remained keenly aware of the churning contradictions and quandaries in the Israelis’ obsession with constructing “normalcy” in the shadows cast first by the Holocaust and then by the conflict with the Arabs. As Nathan Zuckerman’s Israeli friend Shuki tells him in *The Counterlife*:

This is the *homeland* of Jewish abnormality. Worse: now we are the dependent Jews, on your money, your lobby, on our big allowance from Uncle Sam . . . while you are the Jews living . . . without apology, without shame and perfectly *independent*. . . . A Jew like you lives securely, without real fear of persecution or violence, while we are living just the kind of imperiled Jewish existence that we came here to replace.

If *Roth Unbound* has a flaw, it is that Pierpont’s admiration for her subject is itself almost unbound. She compares his sustained pitch of achievement to that of Henry James and too rarely stops to find fault or credit his detractors. Pierpont notes that she and Roth are friends, that he granted her generous access to his files in preparation for her book, that he was in the habit of soliciting her comments on drafts of his novels. Perhaps such closeness explains the sense that

there is almost nothing in *Roth Unbound* to which Roth would object. In largely accepting Roth's view of himself, in other words, this book about Roth lacks the ruthlessly critical scrutiny that marks the best of his own books.

But in the end, *Roth Unbound* enlarges our appreciation of Philip Roth's work and sends us back to his prose, which for all its informality brings enormous control to bear on the unbridled impulses beneath our personal emergencies. By pulling the full sweep of his writing into focus, Pierpont helps reveal the ways in which it takes our measure as social creatures—caught in the tension between ethics and exuberance, between anxious self-denials and no-less-anxious freedoms.

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