

# **The Neurotic Ritual: The Metafictional Discourse in Philip Roth's *The Counterlife***

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## I

A young American novelist recently explained on a TV interview that after reading the list of influences critics had discovered in his text—none of which were familiar to him—he went straight to the nearest public library to borrow the books, for he regarded himself under the obligation of reading his alleged sources. This amusing reaction shows how modern literary critics have placed fiction writers under obligations that would not have been so easily acknowledged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The power of literary criticism was strengthened in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the development of literary theory, which has imposed on fiction writers a much deeper artistic self-consciousness than mere book reviewing could ever hope to decree. Doubtless, with a deconstructionist by his side, Dickens would have written from a quite different standpoint; after all, his genial lack of artistic self-consciousness became his main literary asset and the vehicle that allowed him to write with such liberty. After Modernism and Freud the Victorian paradise of innocent writing has been lost for ever, for responsibility and self-justification are demanded now of writers who resist them by trying experimental ways towards creative freedom. According to leading literary theories like Roland Barthes', since the 1960s a novelist may even find him or herself literally put out of existence once the text reaches the hands of the readers. This theoretical burden guided novelists towards new novelistic experiments in which the writers emerged now and then from behind the curtains to announce their own view of literature in a wry, ironic tone, furthest from the formalism of literary theory. As a

famous instance, John Fowles in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) declined all responsibility for his characters' actions, shifting the reader's interest from the way in which a text is understood to how the author and his/her creatures interact, a frequent consideration in most experimental fiction:

I do not know. This story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mind. If I have pretended until now to know my characters' minds and innermost thoughts, it is because I am writing in (just as I have assumed some of the vocabulary and "voice" of) a convention universally accepted at the time of my story: that the novelist stands next to God. He may not know all, yet he tries to pretend that he does. But I live in the age of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes; if this is a novel, it cannot be a novel in the modern sense of the word.<sup>1</sup>

Paradoxically, it turns out that Fowles' remark is not wholly original since—apart from the reference to French authors and theoreticians—the same kind of comment in vintage Victorians like Thackeray and Trollope offended Henry James' sense of the artistic responsibility of the writer and provoked his response: for him, the novelist must aim, above all, at credibility, especially at the psychological credibility of his characters but never commit the sin of revealing how the novel is built within the text of the novel itself.

Evidently, the task of the novelist consists in merging in a balanced proportion his individuality with the inherited literary tradition and with the contemporary literary corpus. Giving absolute priority to the text disregarding the mind behind it seems as naive as considering the writer an isolated cell of psychological complexes that can only be understood by prying at his private life, but the fact is that writers are much more able to find that middle ground than their critics. The relationship among the writer, the act of writing, the characters and the final product, the text, has been a source of reflection for writers since the early beginning of the novel, as it can be seen in the amazing achievement of Laurence Stern with his *Tristram Shandy* (1760-67),

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1 John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. (New York: Signet, 1970), p. 80.

which carries forward a metafictional discourse that still successfully competes with the complexity of texts by writers like Fowles himself.

In *Tristram Shandy* the preoccupation for the evolution of the plot and for its structure was present together with the use of a first person narrator close enough to the author to be confused with him. Both aspects are still central to our contemporary novel. Back to John Fowles again for an instance it can be noted that he explores the contradictions inherent to writing a Victorian novel—that is to say, a novel implying an omniscient narrator—with the tools of a modern novelist, touching upon points such as to what extent the novelist is free to plan his story or to interfere with the freedom of his characters. He replies to both traditional and experimental novelists by underlying how psychological credibility and structural soundness are ambiguous concepts that can be stretched to bursting point without danger of destroying the specific fictional qualities of the work. Only in a passing remark does Fowles consider the possibility of his hero, Charles Smithson, being a mask of himself—which is, of course, problematic in a way the relationship between, for instance, Joseph Conrad and Marlow is not, since Charles is not even Fowles' contemporary but a truly Victorian man.

The bond connecting Marlow to Conrad and Nathan Zuckerman to Philip Roth is very similar: writer and character have shared or share professional and emotional experience narrated by the latter under the guidance of the former. The writer protects the sphere of his emotional privacy by foregrounding the character, by exposing in different degrees the character's vital experiences to the reader's curiosity. Interestingly enough no reader of Conrad may help being surprised by how much of the public Conrad and how little of the private Conrad there is in Marlow, who is to a certain extent quite a secretive character as far as his private life is concerned. Readers of Philip Roth tend to believe that Nathan Zuckerman is the public outlet of the private Roth, especially because Nathan primarily tells tales about his own private life. In both cases, the actual disappearance of the novelist has the effect of deepening the authenticity of the character-narrator and reinforcing the connection between author and character. Presumably, Ford Maddox's remark about Conrad being a gentleman

but also a writer inclined to punching in the face anybody who denied the authenticity of his characters also applies to Philip Roth, for he also painfully stresses his characters' right to become autonomous beings as real as himself.

The crucial difference between Marlow and Zuckerman is that the former's professional experience lends its content to his stories, which are not related to the act of writing except for the fact that Conrad uses complex narrative techniques to base the story on Marlow's own narrative. As a good sailor Marlow "spins yarns" that somebody else—Conrad or an intermediate narrator—writes down, thus keeping experiencing apart from writing though not from telling. Zuckerman's personal experience cannot be separated from his professional activity, since he is the kind of writer that extensively uses for copy the material most at hand, namely, autobiographical aspects and the stories of the people around him. In his case, living and writing are confused in one single activity.

As I see it, Philip Roth's creation of Nathan Zuckerman is a highly sophisticated version of the device used by clients of agony aunts, who write about their own personal problems—conveniently embellished or altered—on behalf of a shy, close friend. Zuckerman, himself a character created by Peter Tarnopol—another of Roth's alter egos—in *My Life as a Man* (1974) has monopolized a number of novels written by Roth—*The Ghost Writer* (1979), *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981), *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), *The Prague Orgy* (1985)—before appearing in *The Counterlife* (1986) and in Roth's own autobiography, *The Facts* (1989). Fictionalizing one's own life through a surrogate self is nothing new in the novel, for the basic reason that—with the exception of rock stars—no straight autobiography or biography of a young person is welcome by the reading public, in the belief that in order to collect one's life it is necessary to have reached a certain mature age. Nonetheless, it is perfectly common that the same twenty-five year old writer whose biography is deemed uninteresting scores an enormous success with the fictionalized version of his own autobiographical experience lived through a protagonist, often a thinly disguised portrait of the writer himself. Only when the novelist has achieved an important position in the literary

world does his 'authentic' autobiography become a text of interest for the reading public. In Roth's case the autobiography came after having written for so many years about men who were fictions of himself—Zuckerman among others like Portnoy or Tarnopol—that he could no longer show himself as he really is but as another fiction of himself that could not satisfy Zuckerman's own standards of artistic sincerity.

In *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983) Nathan Zuckerman, in pain for some unknown reason that defies medical knowledge, decides to take up medicine and abandon novel writing. Zuckerman's fictional pain reflects Roth's uneasiness about the strength of the discourse carried on in his novels, for writing about a successful writer like Zuckerman is a dangerous game that may end up in the exhaustion of subject, character and writer. David Cronenberg, the Canadian film director specialized in fantasy, observed in a TV interview that the main problem he had to face when filming William Burroughs' *The Naked Lunch* was how to make the life of the protagonist—Burroughs himself—interesting for cinema audiences, since he could not expect them to be interested in seeing a film about a man who is constantly typing. Philip Roth faced a similar problem since, once the story of the formative years of the writer is told—the years when the writer gathers the experience he later tells and lives on—there is nothing left to say but to write about the act of writing, a thematic redundancy that can easily become sterile, even futile. Nathan's need to disconnect from literature leads him to apply for admission to University Medical School in Chicago, under the impression—generalized among humanists—that the pragmatism of the sciences can offer a solid ground on which to found one's life, far from the volatile fragility of letters. Nathan's solution to his writer's block and dejection is, of course, far-fetched and comical, but his complaint rings true enough:

"Look, it's simple: I'm sick of raiding my memory and feeding on the past. There's nothing more to be seen from my angle; if it ever was the thing I did best, it isn't anymore. I want an active connection to life and I want it now. I want an active connection to myself. I'm sick of channeling everything into writing. I want the real thing, the thing in the raw, and not for the writing but for itself. Too long

living out of the suitcase myself. I want to start again for ten hundred different reasons."<sup>2</sup>

I would argue that the ennui felt by Nathan is closely related to the thickening of the intellectual and the metafictional discourse in *The Counterlife*, which I see as a book written primarily by Nathan Zuckerman rather than Philip Roth, obviously corresponding to Roth's deep evaluation of his position as a Jew and of his powers as a writer and character creator but also to Nathan's search for a new kind of fictional, or metafictional discourse. Yet while *The Counterlife* is a climatic book in Roth's career because of its energy, artistry and depth, its counterbook, *The Facts* reads as an anticlimactic response to Nathan's outburst from a fatigued Philip Roth who seems to have doubts about what the idea that the writer must disappear from the text has done to him:

If while writing I couldn't see exactly what I was up to, I do now: this manuscript embodies my counterlife, the antidote and answer to all those fictions that culminated in the fiction of you. In one way *The Counterlife* can be read as fiction about structure, then this is the bare bones, the structure of a life without a fiction.<sup>3</sup>

The idea of an autobiography coming from a writer who has a reputation for writing mainly autobiographical fiction may obey to his need to clarify who Philip Roth is when Nathan Zuckerman rests in the limbo where literary characters grow and live. Roth's text—subtitled 'A Novelist's Autobiography'—is everything except an explanatory note for readers interested in literary gossip. It is actually an essay or collection of essays on the flimsiness of the limits dividing fictional representations of reality from allegedly authentic representations of the same reality in essays. Philip Roth seems to reach the conclusion that the real life of the author lies hidden in the background of his protagonist's existence owing to the fact that any attempt to tell the 'truth' about one's life is thwarted by the problem of how to strike a note of sincerity in self-

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2 Philip Roth, *The Anatomy Lesson*. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984), p.204.

3 Philip Roth, *The Facts*. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1989), p.6.

representations and how to represent faithfully real people who are implicitly much more complex than characters.

The disconcerting presence of Nathan Zuckerman as the first reader of Roth's manuscript and the person who must offer advice on the convenience of its publication fulfils a double function in *The Facts*. There cannot be a harsher critic of Roth's autobiography than Nathan (perhaps with the exception of Nathan's wife, Maria), so that by delegating his self-criticism to Nathan, Roth is certain of having neutralized the critics' objections. On the other hand, Nathan's closing letter adds a touch of surrealism to Roth's alleged good faith, precisely through Nathan's thorough attack against what he considers Roth's inability to sincere himself. According to Nathan, the basic premise on which autobiography is based—namely, that unlike fiction it purports real events—is violated by Roth's unexpected decorum. On the other hand, by conferring the final authority on Nathan Zuckerman, Roth mocks the reader's illusion that the truth about Philip Roth can be found in *The Facts* after so much pseudo-autobiography in his novels.

As a writer neither fond of public exhibitionism nor of rabid privacy, moreover, as a writer convinced of the fact “that the independent reality of the fiction is all there is of importance and that writers should remain in the shadows” (4), Philip Roth justifies his initial motivation to write *The Facts* with his rejection of Nathan Zuckerman, which reminds of Nathan's complaint in *The Anatomy Lesson* about his need to revitalize his own experiences, already quoted:

As a matter of fact, the two longish works of fiction about you, written over a decade, were probably what made me sick of fictionalizing myself further, worn out with coaxing into existence a being whose experience was comparable to my own and yet registered a more powerful valence, a life more highly charged and energized, more entertaining than my own... which happens to have been largely spent, quite unentertainingly, alone in a room with a typewriter. I was depleted by the rules I'd set myself—by having to imagine things not quite as they had happened to me or things that never happened to me or things that couldn't possibly have happened to me happening to an agent, a projection of mine, to a kind of me. If this manuscript conveys anything, it's my exhaustion with masks, disguises, distortions and lies. (7, original ellipsis)

Nathan's vicious attack against Roth's show of seamliness in his own description and against his partiality in the sections about his wife Josie appears together with Maria Zuckerman's comment on *The Facts*, which, curiously enough, is almost identical to her criticism of Nathan's literary cannibalism: "As each person comes into his life, you begin to think, 'So what is this person's usefulness going to be? what is this person going to provide him in the way of a book?' Well, maybe this is the difference between a writer's life and an ordinary life" (189). Zuckerman criticizes Roth as a member of the same brotherhood of writers, a guild ruled by the principle that fiction requires the courage to tell what one thinks, feels and lives; consequently, Nathan accuses Roth of having betrayed the fundamental rule, thus of having produced a failure. Maria's point of view is different due to the fact that she is in a position similar to Josie's—who bears a name as fictional as hers—and, accordingly, apt to be used as a fictional subject. This very same question articulates her whole relationship to Nathan in *The Counterlife*, where this aspect is dealt with in depth. Zuckerman, after being allowed to manipulate the truth about himself and about the other characters in *The Counterlife*, is baffled to find that his own creator is more concerned about his own life than about Nathan Zuckerman's—a kind of egotism of which Nathan is frequently accused in *The Counterlife* by Henry and Maria when they see themselves as Nathan's view of them. Thus reads Nathan's observation in *The Facts*:

Who are we, anyway? And why? Your autobiography doesn't tell us anything of what has happened, in your life, that has bought us out of you. There is an enormous silence about all that. I still realize that the subject here is how the writer came into being, but, from my point of view, it would be more interesting to know what has happened since that has ended up in your writing about me and Maria. What's the relationship between this fiction and your present factuality? (194)

This is, indeed, the counterpoint to Nathan's ostensible freedom. Novelist and character fight to reassert their autonomy for the novelist resents his dependence on his mask in order to speak with the free language of his fiction about himself and the character resents having been designed as an autonomous being except for knowing the exact motivation that led Roth to invent him, a position that, in any case, parallels



that of all children, who find themselves in the world without ever knowing why. Philip Roth may well be tired of “masks, disguises, distortions and lies” but to his alter ego Nathan he is at an advantageous position, for he will never become the subject of the “neurotic ritual” that living a fictional surrogate life for Roth is to Nathan Zuckerman.

In principle, speaking about the autonomy of character is a fallacy as pathetic as the so-called “pathetic fallacy” which attributes a personality to nature. Bakhtin attributes the rise of a new flexible narrative mode (dialogism) to Dostoevsky's incorporation of the writer's voice in the narrative as a voice among others (his characters') and to his decision to allow his heroes scope for self-consciousness besides consciousness; thus, the freedom enjoyed by the character is a feature incorporated by the writer in its design. However, for all their assumed 'authenticity', Conrad wrote the words Marlow professedly tells just like Roth wrote Nathan Zuckerman's. Considering that Nathan thinks for himself is, indeed, naive, though actually many writers claim that their characters act of their own accord and often take the leadership in the direction of the work in progress. In all likelihood, the question treated with less accuracy in the field of Literature is the process through which this is accomplished, the dynamics through which the writer's mind can embody a number of distinct and diverse characters and enjoy the sustained illusion of their reality. Great attention has been paid, for instance, to Shakespeare's ability to deal with an enormous range of characters without letting his personality show behind any of them, but the exact process that led him to write the words that Juliet or Othello speak is obscure. Story-telling doesn't presuppose the ability to enact other people's thoughts, to personify them; nonetheless, the talent for personification seems to be a main feature of quality writers. Basically, there is no huge gap between, for example, Becky Sharp's birth from Thackeray's pen and Nathan Zuckerman's rise from Roth's need to explain to himself the world around him and his place in it; what has changed—perhaps evolved—is the self-consciousness of the writer who, after Freud, is forced to think why s/he has chosen a certain kind of protagonist and how much of him or herself that protagonist shows. In addition to that, psychology has also pointed out

that the thorough description of a single personality is an Herculean task although people are often catalogued according to their psychological type. The novelist, deprived of the authority enjoyed by the omniscient narrator just like the Victorian pater familias was deprived of his oppressing guardianship on his children, tended to increase the work load of the characters and to diminish his in the telling of the story. The discovery that one can get under the skin of another person and see life from another point of view—even from an utterly alien point of view—must have been disturbing enough for the first practitioners of narrative techniques incorporating as much as the character's personality as of the writer's.

Strictly speaking, the autonomy of the character is not actually connected to first person narrative or to a confessional mode: Madame Bovary is as likely to swallow Flaubert's personality whole as Nathan may overshadow Roth's. Naturally, the gradual disappearance of the author's voice—Roth's, for instance, is totally absent from *The Counterlife*—and the expansion of the areas of human experience available as literary subject—the often disturbing candidness about sex and violence of modern fiction—has helped to believe in characters as autonomous entities. To a certain extent, the image we have of others is often more superficial than the treatment many characters receive from their creators: indeed, who do I know better, my teenage son or Salinger's Holden Caulfield? Obviously, when a character is derived from the author's view of a real life person, speech habits, physical appearance, social position or ideology are easier to imitate. Possibly, writers who take their material from the life and people around them find it easier to create consistent characters than writers who speak about a new breed of Martian hermaphrodite in a science-fiction novel, but the process of ventriloquism ("cannibalism" is the term used by Nathan Zuckerman speaking about Roth), which exists in both cases in different degrees of complexity, is essentially unknown. It might be not far from a sort of successful multiple schizophrenia coupled by the reader's capacity to believe in the authenticity of people's existence on the evidence of snatches of conversations and quick glances, paralleling the fact, well-known in linguistics, that it is not indispensable for the

listener to understand the whole sequence of sounds to capture the essence of a message.

Mikhail Bakhtin argues that the dialogical mode arises from the fact that self-consciousness cannot be objectified so as to become the object of study or representation of another person. It is necessary, then, to give characters the chance to command their own representation. As I see it, the basic objection to Bakhtin's view is that a truly polyphonic novel in which all characters find themselves in equality among themselves and with regard to the author is impossible: *The Counterlife* proves it. Although Roth describes his novel as "fiction about structure", which rings true, in my view what is being discussed in the novel is how leaving authorial power in the hands of Zuckerman causes the same problems as having an omniscient narrator. The fundamental problem is that the full expression of the consciousness and self-consciousness of the protagonist cum narrator does not leave room for the free expression of any other character: thus, Nathan blocks the possibility of learning about Henry's and Maria's real thoughts and personalities, a bitter cause of complaint for both secondary characters and the direct source of the structural complexity and richness of the text.

In *The Counterlife* Philip Roth is constantly reminding the reader that no such thing as reality exists in fiction: he's asking for a suspension of belief rather than disbelief, for the only true reality in *The Counterlife* is Nathan's fiction. I have already pointed out that Roth abandons so thoroughly his literary prerogative that Nathan Zuckerman turns out to be not only the protagonist and narrator of *The Counterlife*, but also its writer. Just as *Lord Jim's* complexity arises from being Marlow's own narrative of past events but not Conrad's, *The Counterlife's* rich structure derives from being Nathan's text—and from his choice of an experimental mode to tell his story. In my reading, then, *The Counterlife* differs from, for instance, *The Anatomy Lesson* in the convention used to transmit Nathan's narrative. The surprising turns and twists of the story, calculated to engage the reader in the disentanglement of the story, are easier to understand if the whole text is considered to be precisely a *text*. When writing a

story the novelist pretends that it is feasible to eavesdrop on his or her characters' conversations, even on their thoughts, and the reader blindly accepts the convention, just as cinema goers forget there was a camera filming the action in the movie. In *The Counterlife* there is no such thing as a real version (regarding the convention I have noted) and a false version of the story. The matter is not whether Henry or Nathan is dead or whether Henry reads or not sections of *The Counterlife*. My argument is that in this novel we are given not the story of a writer but a writer's story, by which I mean that the wild shifts of the story are perfectly understandable if the whole text is taken as Nathan's different fictions of his own experiences. These experiences—an important heart disease, its consequences and a new marriage—do not appear as 'they are' (such as in *Goodbye, Columbus*, for instance ) but as Nathan's rendering of them. The two final letters have a function similar to Roth's use of Nathan's letter to close *The Facts*: they summarize the main points dealt with in the novel and round off the metafictional discourse.

## II

*The Counterlife* consists of five sections of different lengths that gather together Nathan's fictionalizing of his own experiences more or less modified (the sections titled 'Judea' and 'Christendom') and his fantasy fiction about different possible developments of the same or similar experiences (the sections titled 'Basel' and 'Gloucestershire') with a middle section, 'Aloft', containing elements from both fictional layers. I have argued that all sections are texts written by Nathan because all of them contain elements dealing with the distinction between reality and fiction and deal with how Nathan perceives the reality of other characters, apart from the obvious mixture of fictional and metafictional elements in the section 'Aloft' and the discussion carried on in the closing letters.

The titles of the sections guide the reader in the exploration of the multiple correspondences that may be found in the book. 'Judea' and 'Christendom' offer opposite choices about how to live Jewishness: the former section narrates Henry's

defection to Israel in order to escape his unsatisfactory emotional life and adopt a view of life that places historical forces above individual needs; the latter tells Nathan's recovery of his Jewish consciousness through reaction to his new English, civilized though mildly anti-Semitic, environment acquired through his marriage to his young wife Maria. In both sections a man—Henry or Nathan—recovers his lost Jewish identity by seeking a new emotional identity in lands radically opposed in their treatment of Jews, though equidistant from the U.S.A. in the kind of Jewish life they allow. These counterlives are contrasted by the counterdeaths found in sections 'Basel' and 'Gloucestershire', which bear the name of their protagonist's utopian land of freedom from being a Jew. These sections deal with the deaths, respectively, of Henry and Nathan due to unsuccessful major heart surgery undergone to overcome sexual impotence: in Henry's case in order to resume his extra-marital sexual life and in Nathan's to father a child by Maria. Both sections are fantasies linked by recurrent motifs such as sexual impotence, marriage, the writing of eulogies and Nathan's presentation of himself as a fictional character. 'Aloft' is a hybrid section, as its lack of identifiable geographical location indicates, linked to aspects of 'Judea' such as Nathan's influence on his most ardent fan, Jimmy, his failure to retrieve Henry back to the U.S.A. and his future fictionalizing of the whole experience. The subsection dealing with the failed hijacking of the El Al plane is a parody of Shuki's ideas about the responsibility of the writer and the influence Nathan may exert on readers as a writer.

'Basel' and 'Gloucestershire' contain a text within a text: respectively, Nathan's eulogy on Henry's death and Nathan's eulogy on his own death read by his editor, though actually Nathan's own. Both spring from Nathan's notebook and are, in a sense, countereulogies: the one to Henry is based on secret aspects of his life and is not apt to be read in public due to its frankness, while the one about Nathan Zuckerman deals with Nathan's public life, reads like a book review of *Carnovsky*—his most successful book and a twin brother of Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*—and is a notorious hypocritical text. The problem of what constitutes the truth about a man frames both eulogies and both sections, mirroring the whole structure of the novel. In

'Basel' Nathan's point is that his fiction of his brother's life is based on a hidden aspect of Henry's sexual life, his affairs with other women, that cannot be made public though it portrays the real Henry—unlike Carol's apparently frank eulogy. In 'Gloucestershire' Nathan masks himself behind the outrageous lie about his life that *Carnovsky* is, giving a public image of himself instead of the private image that he gave of Henry in his inedited panegyric. Both eulogies, at any rate, are texts connected with Nathan's professional activity. Nathan is pained to see that he can't respond as a professional writer to Carol's petition to write a eulogy for Henry because his fictional language is inappropriate to produce a decorous text. Nathan is then forced to acknowledge that there is an important boundary between 'sincere' fiction and truthful non-fiction, the same boundary that he dismisses in Roth's *The Facts*: just like Roth, Nathan is bad at writing unobjectionable texts about his own life experience.

Carol's eulogy—a speech, not a written text—is both proper and inappropriate. Proper because her version is not a literary exercise but an apparent homage to a loved husband; improper because she sports a frankness about her sexual relationship with Henry that might seem out of place in a funeral. Obviously, as a writer, Nathan cannot be blind to Carol's manipulation of Henry's death, to her use of a bold statement to astonish her audience out of any suspicion of Henry's unfaithfulness; what interests him is whether Carol's manipulation is conscious or unconscious, intended to deceive or to bewitch, just as the reader wonders about Nathan's own manipulative skills. He is not the only one to suspect Carol, for Aunt Essie's mistrust of Carol's words places her eulogy side by side with Nathan's fiction:

"And all for the little wife".

"That's the story".

"I like better the ones you write". (41)

The issue in question in this section is Nathan's exploration of how the truth about a character is transmitted by the writer or the story-teller. Interestingly, in 'Basel', Carol becomes Nathan's opponent in the task of leaving an honest memory of Henry's existence. Unlike Nathan, who as a fiction writer has a reputation for handling

his characters to his convenience, Carol enjoys the reputation of respecting the truth, this is why her version, false as it is according to Nathan, silences Nathan's and establishes untruth above truth. The reader's problem is that four different Carols appear in *The Counterlife* and that all of them are Nathan's invention, as it happens with the other characters: the loving though sexually uninteresting wife Henry speaks of in 'Basel', who knows nothing of his affairs; the bold woman who recites the eulogy to conceal Henry's unfaithfulness; the suburban wife who sides with Henry to reprove Nathan's *Carnovsky* in 'Gloucestershire', and, finally, the angry anti-Zionist of 'Aloft'. Clearly, there is no point in deciding who the real Carol is because Zuckerman's question is how her role matches his or Henry's in each episode. In the first section, for instance, Nathan's interest in Carol is related to her ability as plot maker—he even goes to the extent of identifying the literary genre Carol practices:

Either what she'd told everyone from the altar was what she truly believed, either she was a good-hearted, courageous, blind, loyal mate whom Henry had fiendishly deceived to the last, or she was a more interesting woman than he'd ever thought, a subtle and persuasive writer of domestic fiction, who had cunningly reimagined a decent, ordinary, adulterous humanist as a heroic martyr to the connubial bed. (52)

Nathan's choice is the second option: the eulogy materializes Carol's version. Nonetheless, this is significant, since Nathan's main relationship with the other characters is based on what they can offer to him in terms of literary interest, either as plot makers or as interesting characters. Nathan's quarrel with Henry and Maria is related to how they feel manipulated by Nathan as characters and to how they are prevented from speaking out their own version of the events. In this sense Carol is offered an amount of free expression that the others do not enjoy.

The third eulogy in the novel—and the second written by Nathan—can be found in 'Gloucestershire'. In this case, the question is a problem of authorship: Henry feels unable to write a eulogy to his own brother because Nathan's wildly aggressive fiction has left him literally speechless. The text imputed to Nathan's editor is a book review describing aspects of *Carnovsky* that seem to refer not only to Nathan but also to Philip

Roth's books, *Portnoy's Complaint* among them: "Some novelists use style to define the distance between them, the reader, and the material. In *Carnovsky* Nathan used it to collapse the distance. at the same time, inasmuch as he 'used' his life, he used it as if it belonged to someone else, plundering his history and his verbal memory like a vicious thief." (212).

The same questions asked by countless readers about Roth crop up in Nathan's eulogy: is he studying the 'Jewish tribe' as a kind of irreverent anthropologist?, are the books fiction or autobiography?, is it mentally sound to use one's life to write such ferocious comedy? The foundations of his success are—according to Nathan himself—his pruning of "writerliness", his explicitness and his comic confessional mode in which he is positively contrasted to other, sterner confessors: Flaubert, Kafka, Goethe and Henry Miller. The eulogy contains interesting reflections about how the writer is perceived by the readers, which also anticipate and explain Nathan's conclusions at the end of the book: "What people envy in the novelist aren't the things that the novelists think are so enviable but the performing selves that the author indulges, the slipping irresponsibility in and out of his skin, the revealing not in 'I' but in escaping 'I', even if it involves—especially if it involves—piling imaginary afflictions upon himself." (214)

The comment is contrasted by Henry's down-to-earth view that what the reading public really envies is the quantity of money the writer makes and the public admiration s/he receives rather than "the gift for theatrical transformation". While in section 'Basel' the metafictional discussion deals with the relationship between truth and fiction, 'Gloucestershire' discusses the idea of responsibility in the use of biographical elements in fiction. In this section, the problem of responsibility is the aspect emphasized, in this case through Henry's antagonism of Nathan's irresponsible writing of *Carnovsky*, which apparently killed their parents with its grotesque portrait of family life. However, when asked at the funeral which of Nathan's books is his favourite, Henry amazingly answers that his favourite book is *Carnovsky*, despite his bitterness about the book and despite his having avoided Nathan for fear of becoming



the subject for a second *Carnovsky*—a fear that recurs in 'Basel' when Henry is shown in desperate need of confessing his affair with Maria to Nathan.

The topic of the writer's responsibility comes up in Nathan's argument with the group of Israeli settlers who resent the little attention paid by Jewish American writers to the violence Israel is suffering. Daphna, one of the settlers, voices the complaint that American Jewish writers indulge themselves in writing about violence—which is not Nathan's case—while what they consider the self-defence necessary for the survival of Israel in a land of political conflict is rejected by the whole world. The issue of responsibility reappears in Shuki's letter dissuading Nathan from using those same settlers as copy for his books, written as an appeal to his responsibility as a writer. Nathan's implied answer to this aspect seems to run in the direction that the responsibility must be shared with the reader and is not an exclusive of the writer. On the contrary, Shuki writes to Nathan to warn him against taking any interest in Lippman and his group as literary characters because of the danger of their being taken by American readers as representative of all Jews. Shuki is worried that Nathan's average American reader will identify Lippman with Israel, which Roth seems to be daring the reader to do. The power of fiction to alter anything is treated with fine irony by Shuki, though his warning against Nathan's irresponsible portraying of Lippman seems grounded on a solid belief that Jewish fiction affects the way Jews are perceived by non-Jews and is a especially delicate subject in the troubled context of American-Israelian relationships. Nathan answers Shuki's demand with a certain sarcasm due to his scepticism about the effectiveness of Literature as a political tool and because he believes that the U.S.A. would find Lippman a familiar, even congenial, type.

Nathan's—and Roth's—response to the question of the novelist's influence is Jimmy, Nathan Zuckerman's greatest fan and would-be-hijacker. Jimmy's "Forget Remembering!" may certainly have sprung from Nathan's books (Jimmy claims he got all his ideas from reading Nathan Zuckerman's novels) though, in fact, his presence in the book refers to how the influence of writers like Nathan on some American minds already slightly deranged may derive in outright derangement rather than in political

action: the reader, not the writer, is here the irresponsible person. Jimmy is also a parody of Nathan himself as a young American writer and of the kind of reader who often grant writers their literary success. When Jimmy is trying to convince Nathan that "You're a real father to me, Nathan. And not only to me—to a whole generation of pathetic fuck-ups. We're satirists because of you" (173) Nathan is not receiving gratifying esteem but, rather, copy to create the metafictional hijacker of 'Aloft' who puts him in the embarrassing position of discussing his literary merits with a somewhat unfriendly Mossad agent. The episode on board the El Al plane is a Kafkaesque nightmare, a quasi-trial, in which Nathan is accused by an English working-class Mossad agent of being the author of Jimmy's pamphlet instead of the author of his own books: a problem of the apocrypha overshadowing the legitimate books and, of course, a reminder of humbleness—actually of humiliation—for writers who feel invulnerable in their success.

Nathan's mood in *The Counterlife* seems close to his own in *The Anatomy Lesson* and to Roth's in *The Facts*. To Maria's observation that the life of a writer is certainly insane, as insane as Jimmy's, perhaps, he answers that:

"It is. But I no longer want to spend it just writing. There was a time when everything seemed subordinate to making up stories. When I was younger I thought it was a disgrace for a writer to care about anything else. Well, since then I've come to admire conventional life much more and wouldn't mind getting besmirched by it a little. as it is, I feel I've practically written myself out of life". (192)

After eighteen years of constant success, the prosperous author of *Carnovsky*, who started his career in 1960 with *Higher Education*—his first book, paralleling Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus* even in its being awarded an important prize and in its attracting "the ire of rabbis" on its author—is tired of writing. *The Counterlife* narrates a period of creative sterility in Nathan's life, regardless my idea that the book is actually Nathan's fiction about the same period and, consequently, his work in progress at the time. This novel springs from Roth and Zuckerman's wish to plan the future not as an only possibility but as one among others (fictional or non fictional) and from their need to

veer away from the repetitive subject of the Jewish writer tangled in his complex sexual life. Roth's invention of different modes of life and death available to Nathan articulate the ways in which he faces an important turning point in his career: how to transcend the psychological interpretation of character and take into consideration other aspects of Jewishness at a world scale that also impact on the Jewish American individual. This is why *The Counterlife* is one of the American Jewish novels in which less of the U.S.A. can be seen: as it is made clear from Maria's surname, Roth and Zuckerman were looking for a fictional "fresh field", a search in which a metafictional discourse was as necessary as psychoanalysis is to a person having a nervous breakdown.

In all probability, no other country in the world can be more properly called a literary creation than Israel. To Zuckerman, Israel is "a whole country imagining itself" (149) out of the Bible and of Zionism, an ideology of which Nathan says that "The construction of a counterlife that is one's own antimyth was at its very core" (151); no wonder then that Henry Zuckerman must escape there in order to imagine himself out of Nathan's fictional reach and in search of a counterlife to his suburban American life. The references to the Bible are not casual in a novel dealing with the distinction between reality and representation: no other book of which no single historical source can be found has influenced mankind so much. In Shuki's words: "These settlers, you know, are our great believing messianic Jews. The Bible is their bible—these idiots take it seriously. I tell you, all the madness of the human race is in the sanctification of that book. Everything going wrong with this country is in the first five books of the Old Testament" (79). The ideal of Israel springs literally from a remarkable reader response, from the pure and simple suspension of belief in the difference between reality and fiction, call it religious belief or metafictional effect. Gabriel García Márquez once remarked that the Bible was his favourite reading because it was the most interesting novel ever written and so it is, without disparaging the religious feelings of people who believe in its actually gathering God's word. The view of the Bible mainly as literary text, as *the Book*, is also understood by Nathan who defines his own position

as a writer and as a Jewish American writer with these words: "My sacred text wasn't the Bible but novels translated from Russian, German and French into the language in which I was beginning to write and publish my own fiction—not the semantic range of classical Hebrew but the jumpy beat of American English was what excited me" (57). Unlike Nathan, Henry rejects the English American tradition and starts learning Hebrew in Israel in order to play his role in the "tribal epic", as Nathan says, the construction of modern Israel which seems to Nathan a sequel of the Bible's plot.

As I commented earlier on, for the most part, the relationship between Nathan and the other main characters is conditioned by how they are defined as characters by him and how they see themselves against Nathan's version of them. Nathan seems to attract involuntarily people's vision of themselves as characters in his books; thus, for example, run Shuki's thoughts, when he tells Nathan about his trying to prevent his son from joining the Israeli army:

"I try to intervene but I am as effective as one of the fathers in your books. I even thought about you while it was happening. I thought it really didn't require all the agonies of creating a Jewish state where our people could shed their ghetto behaviour, for me to wind up like a helpless father out of a Zuckerman novel, a real old-fashioned Jewish father who's either kissing the children or shouting at them". (83)

Possibly this is the main function of literature: to help people detach themselves from their own behaviour and see themselves from the outside, even as stereotypes. Nathan Zuckerman himself is not free from this particular perception of Literature, for in 'Aloft', for instance, he reflects that the letter he has just written to explain matters over to Henry is, in fact, a way of clarifying things for himself through the written word. He even deals with himself as an objectified, external person in the section 'Basel' where he appears as himself in a text narrated by a third person character who, in any case, is not Roth.

Zuckerman's views about the assimilation of relatives, friends and acquaintances into literary characters is less dogmatic than that of his own book companions:

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"People don't turn themselves over to writers as full-blown characters—generally they give you very little to go on and, after the impact of the initial impression, are barely any help at all. Most people (beginning with the novelist—himself, his family, just about everyone he knows) are absolutely unoriginal, and his job is to make them appear otherwise. It's not easy. If Henry was ever going to turn out interesting, I was going to have to do it". (160)

He implies thus that a certain degree of loss of control is involved in the creation of fictional characters. Due to the writer's limitations in the portrayal of his fellow beings or owing to his wish to transform dull material into an appealing subject, according to Nathan, no fictional depiction of a person is faithful to the person's reality: precisely the point that Henry and Maria resent about his texts and the aspect he resents in Roth's. Nonetheless, Nathan himself is astonished at the ways people are "the invention of each other" (149) and at how people see their lives; so, Philip Roth, who shares his amazement at the mixture of reality and fiction with his character, opens his autobiography with Nathan's words about Henry: "And as he spoke I was thinking, the kind of stories that people turn life into, the kind of lives that people turn stories into". (115)

The game of metafiction is especially intense in 'Basel' and 'Gloucestershire', two sections linked by many symmetrical motifs and correspondences. One instance is the cardiologist's retort to Henry's anguished appeal for help to fight his sexual impotence:

"This is the most difficult thing I've ever had to face."  
"You haven't had a very difficult life then, have you?" (p. 16)

Exactly the same piece of dialogue is mirrored by Maria (on page 188) in answer to Nathan about the same question—which proves both texts are Nathan's. The discussion of Israel's foreign policy at Henry's funeral is intertwined with Nathan's recollection of the notes in which Henry was debating with himself whether he should go to Basel, a combination that anticipates the developments that take Henry to Israel and his final argument with Nathan in 'Judea'. What is more, the journal entries about Henry and Maria seem to Nathan to be "doom-laded notes for *Tristram und Isolde*" (44); later Maria says about their own affair in 'Gloucestershire': "Oh, this is awful. An ordinary

afternoon soap opera and we've magnified it into Tristan and Isolde! That's the farce" (208), another confirmation of both sections being written by Nathan and of his ability to transform himself into his characters.

Some moments are especially revealing, such as the scene in 'Basel', when Nathan reflects on Henry's estrangement from Maria after her Christmas call from Basel—this seems to foresee disagreements between Nathan and his Maria (who is not actually called Maria) such as the one Nathan is seeking with her over the christening of their still unborn baby. Nathan fantasizes about Henry and the German-Swiss Maria married and having an argument because she incidentally remarks her looks are Aryan, but then he decides they are behaving out of character with a curt "that's not them" followed by an even more puzzling "But it needn't be them—could be me, he thought. Us" (46). As I see it, this is the clearest sign of how Nathan's mind works, constantly daydreaming about the possibilities in life, applying his own problems to others or solving them through fantasy. In the same passage Nathan wonders in what kind of predicament he would find himself were he the brother dying at the operating theatre, a reflection which is the direct origin of section 'Gloucestershire': "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". (186)

Another constant in the texts of *The Counterlife* is Nathan's obsession with literary genres. I have already noted that he sees Carol as a domestic writer plotting a domestic tragedy out of Henry's extra-marital affairs and her need to pass for a respected wife. Thus, Nathan reflects thinking about Henry that "Even a life in Basel with Maria was too much like science fiction for him" (50). When he invents the plot in which, for the first time in his life, Nathan Zuckerman finds himself both impotent and the lover of a married woman, he hits on the literary genre at once: "If this were Restoration drama the audience would be in stitches, since it's the husband, after all, who is cuckolding the impotent paramour" (197)—thus revealing that 'Gloucestershire' is a literary territory where to give another turn of the screw to the classic plot of adultery. At Agor in 'Judea', Henry's gun makes Nathan's think of Chekhov's dictum

about the pistol on the wall in Act One that must be fired by Act Three, so, of course, he adds a dramatic, theatrical tension to their already tense conversation: "I wonder what act we were in, not to mention which play—domestic tragedy, historical epic, or just straight farce?" (112). Farce and pistol do come together in the episode of the hijacking in 'Aloft', an episode in which Nathan's reputation as a fiction writer is questioned. Maria is the one who defines the genre of 'Christendom' as pastoral; in her parting letter to Nathan she writes that the quiet of English pastoral will turn out to be too dull for him. Nathan agrees it is not satisfactory and, as she foresaw, he seems ready to enliven it with the Jewish question and the alleged anti-Semitism of Britons through his child: "The pastoral ends here with circumcision" (327), meaning, obviously, that his fiction is combatively dialectic rather than Maria's brand of pastoral 'Gloucestershire'.

All in all, Nathan seems to write to stay sane and to explain the world to himself—possibly like Roth. According to Carol, the difference between Nathan and Henry and the single feature that distinguishes them is Nathan's ability to sublime madness into good fiction, if equally deranged:

"I always thought he was crazy. If you want the truth, I thought you were all a little nuts. You got off best. You never bothered with it in life—you poured that stuff into books and made yourself a fortune. You turned the madness to profit, but it's still all part of the family insanity on the subject of Jews. Henry's just a late-blooming Zuckerman nut". (155)

In sections 'Judea' and 'Christendom' Henry and Nathan find themselves in opposite extremes: the former abandons his emotional, sexual life for a depersonalised kind of living under Lippman's direction, dominated by the forces of history and politics; the latter becomes a family man giving his emotional life a deeper meaning. The issue in question in the passages dealing with Henry and Nathan is to what an extent the novelist's world is too dominated by psychology. In 'Basel' Henry sees Nathan as a brother cum novelist cum psychologist: to Henry since Nathan writes about people's thoughts it follows that he is well prepared to understand his ordeal. Henry's initial doubts are dispelled when he finds that he is lying to his psychiatrist because the man

believes in a different system of values. In this version of the story, Henry is greatly surprised to find sympathy and encouragement in Nathan, the brother writer who published *Carnovsky*. All the same, Henry's trust in Nathan's abilities to listen and comfort vanishes in sections 'Judea' and 'Gloucestershire', where the different Henrys are, basically, combative, eager to deny Nathan's power on them. Nathan is interested in Henry as a character going through significant experiences but also in terms of how Henry is re-writing his life script and of his capability to make unexpected choices or to fool Nathan's sense of plotting. So, when Henry flees to Israel, Nathan's caustic reaction is that "Certainly the rebellious script that he had tried following ten years back could hardly touch this one for originality" (85). Henry's first script—the utopian flight to Basel with his Maria—was useful to Nathan as literary inspiration, because it belonged to his habitual register or discourse. Henry's second script requires ideological discourse to be introduced in Nathan's fiction since the depth of the discussion on Israel depends on Henry's decision to start behaving out of character to rebel against the Henry who dreamed of Basel, Nathan's Henry. Likewise, Nathan 'forces' Roth to incorporate the ideological discourse about anti-Semitism in England by marrying Maria in protest to his indefiniteness as a Jew.

### III

While in 'Basel' Nathan enjoyed an unopposed freedom of creation even though he purportedly based his account of Henry's life on Henry's confessions, in 'Judea' Nathan is surprised to find that Henry limits this freedom. Henry is ready to discuss Israel with Nathan but he puts a ban on discussing his personal life based on his rejection of the kind of literature Nathan produces:

(...) 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. (108-09)



Henry dares Nathan—and Roth—to abandon the psychological discourse that has dominated literature (a discourse rooted in the work of another Jew: Sigmund Freud) and found a new kind of fiction that has a closer connection to life or that contains a larger slice of life than an individual can get a hold on. This is possible either in a state of personal happiness (Nathan and Maria's marriage) or in a state of denial of personal life (Henry's) in which the life of the individual is seen to comprehend many other aspects other than (romantic) feelings.

Nathan Zuckerman's shortcomings as a human being have their origins in his fixation with Literature. Instead of making the supreme effort of understanding or intuiting Henry's motivations, Nathan decides to remain detached from Henry just as if Henry were a character in fiction, specifically one of the lost souls roaming in Russian fiction in search of an "elevated goal". Nathan takes Literature, not life, as his guide to understand Henry; consequently, it is understandable that Henry feels angry at what he considers Nathan's narrow-mindedness. What most enrages Henry is how Nathan's sensitivity is so deformed by fiction that he can no longer see people for what they are, especially his own brother: "It's never Henry as an autonomous being, it is always Henry on the brink of being a cliché—my brother the stereotype". (143)

Henry resists becoming simplified like a character in fiction or being determined by the Freudian heritage of Literature: he resists being pinned down like a butterfly. The anger fired at Nathan as a limited writer in 'Judea' is complemented by Henry's annoyance at finding his confidences the subject of his dead brother's writings in 'Gloucestershire'. Henry, who finds the journals containing the notes used by Nathan to write his fiction, steals the notes about himself to prevent biographers from plundering them: Henry becomes, so to speak, Nathan's editor. In an interesting metafictional twist, Henry is seen reading 'Basel', which he believes to have been written by Nathan as a distraction from his mortal illness. Henry is disgusted by Nathan "controlling and manipulating my freedom" (231) and by the impossibility of distinguishing his real self from Nathan's Henry of whom he says that "His Henry is, if anyone, him—" (230). Reading 'Basel' confirms to Henry the idea that Nathan wrote it

out of a dream of fratricide: 'Judea' is the corresponding acceptable fantasy of heroic deliverance of the weaker brother. The explanation that this version of Henry gives to Nathan's sick psyche is classically psychoanalytical: it was Nathan who succumbed to their father's influence and was never able to form a family. 'Christendom' is rightly seen by Henry as a "a pure magical dream of flight" (232); he removes from this section two pages with references to him which do not appear in the text the reader is offered—the most twisted joke Roth plays at the reader's gullibility. Henry is angry at Nathan's use of Maria's name to christen his mistress in 'Gloucestershire', though, as Jimmy observed in Israel, Maria is the name or the arch-shiksa: the Virgin Mary, and, so a proper symbolic name for all Gentile women. After reaching the conclusion that "The man was a cannibal" (242), Henry takes 'Basel', 'Judea' and the first sections of 'Aloft' to dump them in the rubbish bin—then finds out Nathan's notes for his own eulogy and assumes towards Nathan a highly critical position, which seems to be the base of Roth's autobiography: "Unlike Nathan's, what Henry's life had come to represent was living with the facts—instead of trying to alter the facts, taking the facts and letting them inundate him". (258)

While Henry rejects Literature and embraces the reality of facts, Maria draws the moral guidance to stay with her husband from Tolstoy's *Married Love* (the actual title provided by Nathan is *Family Happiness*), though, of course, Tolstoy might well be the Nathan's actual source for this episode of adultery. To Maria's version of Tolstoy's story, Nathan adds a quotation with the real end of the tale: Maria has somehow embellished the story to justify her staying with her uncaring husband.

Maria's view of her relationship with Nathan is thoroughly dominated by fiction. Partly because she is also a writer (she defines herself as a "hackette") with a credo very different from Nathan's and partly because she is a reader of Nathan's books she has a series of often quite funny misconceptions and preconceptions about Nathan Zuckerman. For instance, she's very surprised at his request to form a family with her because "Those portraits you paint of the men in those books didn't prepare me for this" (194) and suspects that he's using her and his marriage proposal as copy

for a book. As a good English woman she's deeply concerned with the preservation of her privacy and is not easily convinced by Nathan's argument that "I can't write 'about' anyone. Even when I try it comes out someone else" (195). Her idea of being an invention of Nathan's is disturbing: she seems convinced that he's giving their relationship a plot, a narrative course, which she rejects, for her point is that life develops in a flow not in dramatic peaks, so that a life described with those dramatic peaks, as hers is, must be fictional.

Nathan's memories of his marriage proposal are tinged with Maria's distrust of Nathan the man because of Nathan the writer. Her candidness at his offer is touching enough: "No, no. I've read your books—you need a lionlike temptress in here to give your libido a good thrashing" (72). Curiously enough, in 'Gloucestershire' Nathan describes Maria as the "temptress": an unself-conscious temptress who can't understand why he's interested in an ordinary English woman like her—though, of course, very little is ordinary about her. Nathan's reasoning reads like the same impulse that drove Henry to Israel: "Because I've decided to give up the artificial fiction of being myself for the genuine, satisfying falseness of being somebody else. Marry me" (73). The somebody else Nathan Zuckerman becomes when he marries Maria is, primarily, a husband and father, and, above all, a Jew. That he needs marriage to a Gentile woman in order to find his Jewish identity suggests how profound the differences with Henry are, who marries the whole land of Israel to regain Jewish awareness.

Maria's fiction is, certainly, pastoral: "Mine is fiction displaying all the English virtues of tact, good sense, irony, and restraint—fatally retrograde" (198). Unlike Nathan, she finds it unethical to talk about her family, particularly about her mother's embarrassing anti-Semitism, even though she seems aware of the fact that her fiction can no longer be successful in a world of Nathan Zuckermans. Mrs Freshfield, Maria's mother, is also a writer: *The Interior of the Georgian Manor*, *The Smaller Georgian Country House*, *Georgians at Home* are some of the very British titles of her books essays in which nothing of her unhappy married life or her anti-Semitism can be read.

One of the more problematic passages of *The Counterlife* is Maria's conversation with Nathan's ghost in 'Gloucestershire'. It is the countertext to Henry's raid of Nathan's apartment and, like Nathan's eulogy, his own work, for presumably Maria would call herself by her own name had she written this piece, something which seemed likely owing to her speech in the sense that after Nathan's death it is her turn to invent him. Maria does not feel as affronted by 'Christendom' as Henry is by the other sections: "We met as if in a time capsule, imprisoned by my fear of discovery, like something one reads about in a nineteenth-century novel. There's a sense in which it is completely fictitious. I could believe I made the whole thing up" (247). Maria, who opposes the relatives' destroying documents belonging to famous people, understands then their actions and so it is implied that she would understand Henry whom she never meets. In any case, unlike Henry, she's ready to take the risk of having her privacy exposed to the voracity of the reading public because "This imaginary life is our offspring" (249).

#### IV

Just like *The Facts*, *The Counterlife* ends with an epistolary section, in this case containing two letters—one by Maria and the other by Nathan. Maria's letter is both her criticism of *The Counterlife*, especially of 'Christendom', and her denunciation of Nathan as a manipulator, in a form that recalls Nathan's own letter to Roth at the end of *The Facts*. This letter is actually Maria's parting letter to Nathan, triggered by her renunciation to go on living the life of a character shaped by Nathan's fictional needs:

"I'm leaving you.

I'm leaving the book."

That's it. of course. The book! She conceives of herself as my fabrication, brands herself a fantasy and cleverly absconds, leaving not just me but a promising novel of cultural warfare written but for the happy beginning. (316)

Whether the oncoming novel of cultural warfare is Roth's new project for Maria and Nathan or whether Nathan is going to be threatened with the breakdown that led Roth to write *The Facts*, the question is that with this passage Nathan Zuckerman slips out

of his fiction *The Counterlife* to reflect on Maria's position as his character and on both Maria's and his as Roth's creations. Fond as he is of clarifying things to himself through writing—it is just necessary to recall his confession of having written his letter to Henry in 'Aloft' to gather his thoughts on the subject—Nathan reflects on Maria by letting her speak through her letter. The Maria of the letter, though purporting to be the real Maria is the most fictional version of her: she complains of having been made to go through Nathan's death in 'Gloucestershire', a death that only occurred in Nathan's fiction, while at the same time she shows her fear that Nathan will next turn to fantasizing about her daughter Phoebe's death. According to Maria, 'Christendom' also contains many samples of fictional constructions that do not correspond to reality but to Nathan's imagination: Sarah's words, the embarrassing scene at the restaurant. Maria even refers back to page 73 to remind Nathan of what her function in the book should have been, instead of reasserting his dormant Jewishness she should have been his helpmate "to rise in exuberant rebellion against your author and remake your life" (317). Nathan's life is remade by Roth in terms Maria dislikes. She's tired of the subject of Jewishness and refuses to take part in fiction based on ideas she considers primitive—unlike Henry, Maria has the strong conviction that the happiness of private life is the most important value in life, the one that must be preserved against the gratuitous invasion of history, religion or ideology: "You and I argue, and twentieth-century history comes looming up, and at its most infernal". (320)

This is why she won't write about her mother: Maria believes that her fiction about her would destroy her family—just like Nathan destroyed his with *Carnovsky*—and to her the price is excessive. Likewise, she's trying to prevent Nathan from using their private life in fiction for she knows it would be destroyed as well or to introduce complex issues, such as Jewishness, just for the sake of enlivening the literary interest of their real life. The puzzling point is that this Maria who writes the letter—the one who denies being called Maria, the same who points out Nathan's lies—is not the real Maria but Nathan's version of her. As this nameless woman says, the game is diabolic:

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"P.P.S. At the point where 'Maria' appears to be most her own woman, most resisting you, most saying I cannot live the life you have imposed upon me, not if it's going to be a life of us quarrelling about your Jewishness in England—that is impossible—at this point of greatest strength, she is least real, which is to say least her own woman, because she has become again your 'character', just one of a series of fictive propositions. This is diabolical of you". (323)

Rather than a letter from the author to his character, Nathan's letter to Maria is an acknowledgement of fellowship in the hard task of being somebody else's characters: Roth's. Nathan argues that the fear of not being able to enjoy their freedom of action has led both to excesses: in his case possibly to the excess of the hijacking episode and to the excess of manipulating other characters, Maria included. However, Nathan is as bound by Roth's fiction as Maria is by his: "Being Zuckerman is one long performance and the very opposite of what is thought of being oneself". (323)

The discussion Nathan embarks on about the consistency of the self is as much Roth's as his own. Nathan emphasizes the point that staying sane is often a matter of separating self-consciousness and natural being and that in the case of writers like him not only does the author lack a real self but whenever he finally gets one it is likely to be "the self that best gets one through" (324). Nathan Zuckerman is nobody but the potential everybody and so is a writer like Roth within his fiction:

What I have instead is a variety of impersonations I can do, and not only of myself—a troupe of players I have internalized, a permanent company of actors that I can call upon when a self is required, an ever-evolving stock of pieces and parts that forms my repertoire. But I certainly have no self independent of my imposturing, artistic efforts to have me. Nor would I want one. I am a theater and nothing more than a theater. (325)

It follows that the difference between fiction writers and the rest of the people does not have to do with Maria's view in *The Facts* that it depends on the writer's obsession with using other people as literary inspiration but with the number of selves a human being personifies: one single, consistent self is enough to the real Maria—if she exists outside Zuckerman's fiction in Roth's; multiple impersonations but no fixed core are what form the writer's mind, Roth's or Zuckerman's.

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The main difference between Maria and Nathan seems to be that while Maria believes in the possibility of altering their fictional courses by sheer force of opposition—their autonomy against Roth's—as a writer Zuckerman is not ignorant of the fact that the master puppeteer is Roth in any case: “It may be as you say that this is no life, but use your own enchanting, enrapturing brains: this life is as close to life as you, and I, and our child can ever hope to come” (328). No matter how strong the illusion of reality ingrained in the representation of a character is or how credible the author's claim that the characters behave independently sounds, characters cannot run away out of the book covers. Nevertheless, inside the text they enact lives seemingly as substantial as those of real people: indeed, Roth complains in *The Facts* that his life is becoming a shadow of Zuckerman's. In addition to that, characters enjoy over regular mortals the chance of coming back from death (both Nathan and Henry do), of living alternative lives, in a word, of enjoying *The Counterlife* that fiction is to real life as authors may never do.

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