

Philip Roth and the Jewish Establishment

by

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Abstract

There have been many controversial Jewish writers, but none have undergone the kind of scrutiny and even hostility from fellow Jews as novelist Philip Roth. Roth's unapologetic portraits of assimilated Jews rejecting traditional values alienated him from Jewish leaders, establishing Roth as the consummate Jewish outsider. At the same time, his work helped shape the self-understanding of an emerging generation of Americanized Jewry, and continues to speak to Jews today. This thesis examines the Roth's treatment of the Jewish establishment in his literature, and concludes that his efforts amount to an argument for the acceptance of a greater sense of Jewish individualism and freedom from authority.

The texts dealt with in this thesis include *Portnoy's Complaint*, *Operation Shylock*, and Roth's Zuckerman novels, as well as the non-fiction essays and interviews on writing collected in *Reading Myself and Others*. Roth's outsidership is also examined through the writings of various real-life members of the Jewish establishment, including rabbis, historians, and literary critics.

In my first section, I examine the nature of the Jewish establishment as presented in Roth's work. Roth's establishment figures come from both the spiritual and secular areas of Jewish society, but they share certain key features, such as a belief that they have a mandate to confer values and beliefs on the Jewish community, and that they have the right to represent the Jewish community to the outside world. However, these leaders often seem more interested in maintaining their status than serving the Jewish community. Roth is not critical merely of the establishment figures themselves, but also of the Jewish community for so readily embracing these leaders and wrongly conferring upon them immunity from criticism.

In the second section, I look at the objections Roth has to the Jewish leadership in the context of various Jewish issues that it seems could be better dealt with if Jews put less focus on the Jewish establishment and more focus on individual Jewish voices. I deal with conceptions of success within the Jewish community that Roth presents as problematic, and put special emphasis on disagreements about the nature of anti-Semitism and its relationship to criticism and stereotyping of the Jewish community and its leadership. Particular attention is given to the way Roth breaks down notions of who has the right to criticize prevailing Jewish attitudes, for example, by giving voices to anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist figures.

The third section deals with debates between Jewish literary critics regarding Roth's status as a Jewish outsider, looking specifically at the criticism of Irving Howe in "Philip Roth Reconsidered" and the responses of various critics to this piece. Howe argues that Roth has broken with Jewish literary tradition to the point where his work is no longer relevant to Jews. I break down this argument and counter that Howe is misinterpreting Roth's decision to maintain a deliberate distance from Jewish establishment guidelines in his advocacy of greater individualism among Jews.

In the final section, I look at portraits of two writers developed in Roth's *The Ghost Writer* that can be viewed as a model for understanding the nature of the Jewish outsider and the Jewish establishment. Examination of these characters provides insight as to Roth's own aims and intentions as a Jewish outsider, and helps clarify Roth's attitudes toward establishment control of Jewish life.

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Introduction

Of the great Jewish writers of this past century, perhaps none have made such an impact on the Jewish community as novelist Philip Roth. From his early depictions of American Jewish life in *Goodbye, Columbus*, to the controversial *Portnoy's Complaint* and his Zuckerman novels, Roth has built a reputation as an establishment outsider, the "bad boy" of Jewish fiction. Due to portrayals of Jews and the Jewish community that some have found insulting and offensive, Roth has been called a "traitor" and "self-hating Jew," even by influential leaders of the Jewish community. However, it is clear that Roth's work has raised important questions regarding the nature of the American Jewish establishment and the role of critical outsiders to the Jewish community.

By Jewish establishment, I mean to group those influential leaders of the Jewish community, including rabbis, heads of Jewish institutions, and even Jewish educators and literary critics, who do much of the work in defining and confronting issues of import to the Jewish community. In the last half-century, such issues have revolved around what it means to be a Jew and what obligations Jews have to each other and the non-Jewish world. Thus, in studying Roth's function as an outsider to the Jewish establishment, we must examine both how the Jewish establishment has responded to Roth's work, as well as how Roth treats the Jewish establishment imaginatively through his literature.

In Roth's work, the Jewish establishment facilitates the construction of normative Jewish perspectives regarding conceptions of success, the nature of anti-Semitism, and the Jewish community's relationship with the State of Israel. One can gain enormous perspectives on the effects of Roth's work as an outsider by examining his treatment of the Jewish establishment's position on these issues, as well as how the Jewish establishment has

responded to Roth's criticism. Finally, it is important to note that the use of the phrase 'Jewish Establishment' intentionally blurs the line between individuals in tune with the popular Jewish culture that arose early in Roth's career and the New York Jewish intellectual establishment of Roth's time. Despite his financial and popular success as an author, or perhaps partially as a result of it, Roth's status as a Jewish outsider has alienated him from more than one segment of Jewish leadership. Exploring the different and evolving sources of authority comprising the Jewish establishment, and how each source of authority has responded to Roth's work and is responded to in Roth's work, is essential to understanding Roth's function as a Jewish outsider.

For the purposes of this thesis, I will tend to downplay the autobiographical aspects of Roth's fiction. Philip Roth often complains of critics who engage in "reducing fiction to some petty biographic detective game,"¹ and, while much of Roth's fiction involves a central character who bears a great resemblance to the author, highlighting the minutiae of Roth's often obscure personal history and its parallels in the text would detract from the essential questions at hand. Thus, I will try to distinguish between Jewish outsidership within the Philip Roth novel and Philip Roth's shifting outsider status in the Jewish community. For example, it is not uncommon that personal attacks on Philip Roth confuse the author and his protagonists, resulting in fantastical speculation about the Roth's intentions and motivations. Such criticism does little to illuminate the effects of the Roth novel on the Jewish community.

That being said, many of the characters to be found in Roth's fictional worlds do appear to be caricatures of real figures in Roth's very public rise to popular and critical success, an often critical aspect of his work. In specific cases that Roth has decided to make

¹ Cooper, *Philip Roth and the Jews*, 1.

clear he is responding to a “real-life” Jewish establishment figure, for example, through the use of poorly disguised allusions about which there is general agreement among literary critics, it can be valuable to examine the complex relationship between Roth and the fictional characters with whom he speaks. In such cases, contextualizing the complex and often bewildering relationships between characters within the ever-shifting “Jewish establishment” as depicted inside Roth’s work, and concurrently in the “real world,” can bring great insight into Roth’s perspectives on Jewish identity and the Jewish community.

One last aspect of Roth’s exploration of establishment dynamics that must be discussed is Roth’s construction of literary insiders and outsiders as a model for Jewish establishment and outsider dynamics in *The Ghost Writer*. Close examination of the characters depicted in this novel suggests a framework by which one can examine the emotional and psychological consequences of one’s becoming and being an insider or outsider. This construction can serve as a functional model for deeper understanding of the individual’s stake in such a dynamic, and is greatly illuminating for our understanding of Roth’s constructed American Jewish community.

This thesis will explore the characterization of establishment figures within Roth’s fiction, the idea of Jewish establishment elitism, and the attitudes of the Jewish establishment toward concepts such as anti-Semitism and Zionism. To this end, it will integrate some of the concepts Philip Roth introduces in *Reading Myself and Others*, a collection of essays in which he makes observations regarding the writing of Jewish fiction, as well as comments and criticisms from Roth’s Jewish contemporaries. Finally, it will examine Roth’s model of literary outsidership as it relates to Jewish outsidership. Through this process, I hope to bridge the gap between Roth’s literary work and the dynamics of the Jewish community that both contributed to and was affected by it. Roth’s prose, and the popular and critical

responses to his prose, compel us to think about who is deserving to represent Jewish culture, the role of Jewish art and the Jewish artist, the role of Jewish institutions and individuals, and who are the insiders and outsiders of the Jewish community. Ultimately, Roth's development of the outsider versus establishment dynamic shows us that Jewish thought belongs to the individual, and communal enforcement of establishment ideals leads to the tragic suppression of Jewish creativity.

The Jewish Establishment

Establishment figures in Roth's fiction vary from leaders of Jewish religious and cultural institutions to assimilated Jews of prominence. These figures seem to serve in two capacities. First, the Jewish establishment figures have, or claim to have, a mandate to confer Jewish values and attitudes upon the Jewish community, and second, they claim to represent the Jewish community to the outside world. For its part, the Jewish community often reciprocates, demonstrating blind acceptance of the standards and ideals of the establishment. The establishment's response to outsider figures, and to Roth himself, are presented as reactions intended primarily to maintain a status quo on authority within the Jewish community, to the detriment of Jewish creativity and intellectual thought.

Roth's most scathing attack on the Jewish establishment-community relationship is presented in *Portnoy's Complaint*, in which a family is described whose rules and attitudes are adopted directly from those establishment figures representing Jewish tradition and traditional values. For example, Roth parodies the figure of the rabbi as emissary of the Jewish establishment. Early in *Portnoy's Complaint*, the central character Alexander Portnoy spends a great deal of time deriding his childhood rabbi, and, through the rabbi, the concept of the Jewish need for the approval of a Jewish establishment figure. In one scene, Portnoy fumes about his mother's going on about Rabbi Warshaw having visited her in the hospital: "What else has he got to do, Mother? To him, uttering beautiful banalities to people scared out of their wits—that is to him what playing baseball is to me. He loves it!"² Portnoy here accuses both the rabbi of lacking substance with his "beautiful banalities," and criticizes his mother of choosing to revere the man for a self-gratifying act requiring no great sacrifice.

² Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint*, 73.

The relationship between the individual Jew and the establishment figure is often criticized by Portnoy as false and exaggerated, as the supposedly larger-than-life figures at the head of the Jewish community are nearly worshipped for what often amounts to empty, mechanical gestures. Portnoy wonders if a half-hour of sitting by someone's hospital bed or an hour of talking to parents after their child committed suicide is really so great as to justify the almost mystical admiration of famed rabbis of his community. Perhaps some of Portnoy's resentment can be attributed to the fact that his occupation, as an attorney who has declined a high income in choosing to serve the public, has not afforded him anywhere near the respect shown to Jewish establishment figures despite the sacrifice. Portnoy has become almost a casualty of the constructed individual-establishment relationship, closed off from the respect and attention given to community leaders who are all-too-often undeserving, and too enlightened to reap the psychological benefits from reverence of community leaders.

Portnoy is finally angry that the establishment position Rabbi Warshaw holds has made him virtually immune from criticism, as he explains, "if you stood next to him on the bus and didn't know he was so revered, you would say, "That man stinks to high heaven of cigarettes."³ With this statement, Portnoy is exposing the unpleasant reality of the Jewish community's willful denial of the deficiencies of their spiritual leader. Portnoy further rails against Rabbi Warshaw's over-enunciation of words, even referring to the rabbi as Rabbi Syllable. Portnoy uses a disparity between the rabbi's reputation and the way he presents himself publicly to show how leaders in the Jewish community are unduly immune to criticism and undeserving of the reputation they receive from their position. The individuals in the Jewish community are also implicated, having willfully blinded themselves to the

³ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint*, 73.

inadequacy of their spiritual leader, and thus having lost control over the direction of their community. It is also important to note that these charges are leveled from the perspective of the emotionally disturbed Portnoy, a man who could clearly benefit from honest spiritual guidance, but sees the rabbinic leaders of his community as inadequate deliverers of Jewish traditions and ideals.

A similar criticism of Jewish establishment rabbis is made in one of Roth's early short stories, "The Conversion of the Jews." In this story, the establishment figure is Rabbi Marvin Binder, who is described as "a tall, handsome, broad-shouldered man of thirty with thick strong-fibered black hair," whose only goal is seemingly to keep curious students from asking difficult questions.⁴ Rabbi Binder repeatedly disciplines a young student for questioning a logical inconstancy in the Rabbi's given reason for rejecting a Christian concept, refusing to address the question in what is ultimately a display of his own inadequacy as a rabbi and teacher. In the end, it seems that Rabbi Binder's main qualification for Jewish leadership is his good looks. Roth uses Rabbi Warshaw and Rabbi Binder to illustrate how the Jewish establishment awards titles to a few undeserving individuals for altogether the wrong reasons. These titles and the reputation built up after years of inadequate leadership then become part of the characters' immunity to criticism by other Jews.

Roth, however, does not restrict his criticism of establishment leadership to religious figures. In *The Ghost Writer*, the primary character representing the Jewish establishment is Judge Leopold Wapter. Judge Wapter's credentials as a leader of the Jewish community do not include rabbinic ordination, but instead the fulfillment of the American Jewish dream, specifically, upward social mobility despite a modest background. Nathan Zuckerman, the

⁴ Roth, "The Conversion of the Jews", 144.

Roth-esque writer who narrates *The Ghost Writer*, relates that his father would tell stories of the Wapter brothers in the slum they grew up in... “when we drove by the landscaped gardens and turreted stone house... where Wapter lived with a spinster daughter—one of the first Jewish students at Vassar College... and his wife, the department-store heiress.”⁵ The exaggerated way Roth depicts Zuckerman’s father’s wonder at Wapter’s success story casts a shadow of doubt regarding Wapter’s infallibility as a leader of the Jewish community. Furthermore, Zuckerman ridicules the way his family whispers the words “judge’s chambers” when discussing Wapter’s planned interview of Zuckerman for a college recommendation letter. When the interview actually takes place, Zuckerman is quick to note how ordinary the ‘chambers’ are, an ordinary room with a desk beyond the courtroom. The description of this room echoes the plainness of Wapter himself, whose personal success seems not to have bestowed any extraordinary powers of charisma or intellect on the judge. This bursting of such inflated expectations is central to Roth’s assault on the Jewish establishment.

One last category of establishment leadership that Roth often targets is the Jewish academic. In *The Anatomy Lesson*, the sequel to *The Ghost Writer*, Zuckerman lashes out at Milton Appel, a Jewish establishment figure often identified as the Jewish historian and literary critic Irving Howe.⁶ Irving Howe was prominent Jewish establishment figure who initially praised Roth’s first collection of short stories. After the infamy of *Portnoy’s Complaint*, however, Howe wrote an essay entitled “Philip Roth Reconsidered” in which he revised his analysis of Roth’s original work in what could be only described as a scathing attack. This essay is represented in *The Anatomy Lesson*, as the fictional Zuckerman characterizes the fictional Milton Appel’s essay reconsidering the writer’s first collection of short stories.

⁵ Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, 96-7.

⁶ Roth, *Reading Myself and Others*, 130.

“Except for a single readable story, that first collection was tendentious junk, the byproduct of a pervasive and unfocused hostility,” Appel writes, “No Jews like Zuckerman’s had ever existed other than as a caricature...none of the books could be said to exist at all, but were contrived as a species of sub-literature for the newly ‘liberated’ middle class, for an ‘audience,’ as distinguished from serious readers.”⁷ The rage that Zuckerman feels upon remembering Appel’s attack on his work has multiple facets. First, Zuckerman’s anger is exacerbated by the fact that he once respected Appel’s opinion so deeply, having identified with Appel’s rise as a Jewish literary icon from humble beginnings. In fact, when Zuckerman reaches Appel by telephone and rants at the critic, he cries, “What if I trotted out your youthful essay about being insufficiently Jewish for Poppa and the Jews—written before you got frozen stiff in your militant grown-upism!”⁸ Here, Roth through Zuckerman makes reference to an early piece by Howe, in which Howe had taken the stance of an outsider of the Jewish community. This exchange illustrates how Zuckerman and Appel began on similar paths in the literary community before Appel became part of the Jewish establishment. Zuckerman is essentially declaring that both were once anti-establishment Jews, before Appel sold out to the Jewish establishment.

Zuckerman’s anger is directed specifically at Appel, but also at the kind of self-righteous, highbrow elitism among Jewish establishment figures that he represents. In his telephone rant, Zuckerman primarily attacks the moral high ground Appel claims in defense of the Jewish people: “Oh, I’ll tell you our calling—President of the Rabbinical Society for the Suppression of Laughter in the Interest of Loftier Values! Minister of the Official Style for Jewish Books Other than the Manual for Circumcision. Regulation number one; Do not

⁷ Roth, *The Anatomy Lesson*, 69.

⁸ Roth, *The Anatomy Lesson*, 167.

mention your cock.”⁹ Zuckerman’s outrage is the result of the holier-than-thou Appel has adopted as a member of the Jewish establishment. Here, circumcision represents an aspect of Judaism that clashes with Appel’s perception of higher Jewish values. Zuckerman’s lewd comment is thus a challenge to Appel regarding the critic’s implicit claim that he is somehow more legitimately Jewish than Zuckerman.

Zuckerman furthermore attacks those Jews whose opposition to his controversial work was buoyed by Appel’s criticism. Zuckerman believes that his closed-minded Jewish critics would be alienated by Appel’s establishment elitism, if the critics had not chosen to ignore it. Zuckerman rages, “The comfort that idiot had given the fatheads! Those xenophobes, those sentimental, chauvinist, philistine Jews, vindicated in their judgment of Zuckerman by the cultivated verdict of unassailable Appel, Jews whose political discussion and cultural pleasures and social arrangements, whose simple dinner conversation, the Distinguished Professor couldn’t have borne for ten seconds.”¹⁰ Zuckerman here attacks Appel’s legitimacy as a spokesperson for Jews, crying that Appel’s establishment elitism makes him a far less credible representative of American Jewry than Zuckerman himself. “Appel’s disgust for the happy millions who worship at the shrine of the delicatessen and cherish *Fiddler on the Roof* was far beyond anything in Zuckerman’s nastiest pages,” Roth writes.¹¹ Here Roth points out a split between the Jewish community and establishment, in which the community-at-large had embraced aspects of a popular culture that establishment figures, particularly Howe, wanted to discredit.

A final important target of Zuckerman’s anger in the *Anatomy Lesson* is the moral self-righteousness of Jewish establishment figures like Appel. Zuckerman’s rage is

⁹ Roth, *The Anatomy Lesson*, 167.

¹⁰ Roth, *The Anatomy Lesson*, 77.

¹¹ Roth, *The Anatomy Lesson*, 78.

reanimated when he learns that Appel wants him to write a column in support of Israel for the *New York Times*. A note sent to Zuckerman's friend concerning this column contains underhanded jabs at Zuckerman—specifically, Appel positions himself as the all-important, serious Jewish leader, and makes Zuckerman out to be a Jewish misfit presented with the opportunity to do a little good. When Zuckerman rages at Appel over the phone, he attacks this pretentiousness precisely: "All you unstained, undegenerate, unselfish, loyal, responsible, high-minded Jews, good responsible citizen Jews, taking on the burdens of the Jewish people and worrying about the future of the State of Israel—and chinning yourselves like muscle-builders on your virtue!"¹² Clearly, Appel's establishment elitism is identified not only as a class issue, but also in terms of moral self-righteousness.

Being a member of the Jewish establishment in Roth's fiction does not merely give one license to impart Jewish tradition and thought, but also to be a representative of the Jewish people. The question of who has the right to speak for Jews is dealt with in *Reading Myself and Others*, in the context of Philip Roth's own prominence in the Jewish community. After Roth gained celebrity status as the author of *Portnoy's Complaint*, Jewish establishment figures began to question if Roth's public Jewishness was appropriate. Roth points out that Rabbi Emanuel Rackman, a professor at Yeshiva University, referred to a conference in Jerusalem at which Roth spoke, where "certain Jewish writers were 'assuming the mantle of self-appointed spokesmen and leaders for Judaism.'" In the essay, "Writing about Jews," Roth emphatically denies the accusation that he claims to speak for the Jewish community: "I did not want to, did not intend to, and was not able to speak *for* American Jews; I surely did not deny, and no one questioned the fact, that I spoke *to* them, and I hope to others as

¹² Roth, *The Anatomy Lesson*, 167.

well.”¹³ This statement sheds light onto Zuckerman’s disgust for Appel’s adoption of the voice of the American Jew. Roth seems to convey the idea that part of the problem with the Jewish establishment is its claim to represent the Jewish individual; while Zuckerman tries to address Jewish issues, Appel claims to speak for the entire Jewish community.

One final objection Roth has to the Jewish establishment is the way in which leaders persistently work to maintain the status quo, regardless of the consequences to the Jewish community. The most poignant example of this appears in *The Ghost Writer*, in a list of questions posed to Zuckerman by Judge Wapter. After Zuckerman publishes the controversial short story “Higher Education,” Zuckerman’s father approaches the judge to rebuke his son for putting forth such firmly anti-establishment work. Wapter’s response to Zuckerman’s story, including a questionnaire entitled “Ten Questions for Nathan Zuckerman,” is a practical synopsis of Jewish establishment responses to rules Roth broke when publishing *Portnoy’s Complaint*, revealing clearly Roth’s perceptions of real-life establishment figures and their responses to his work, or more accurately, their responses to his unwelcome rise to prominence in the Jewish world. One of the most telling of the ten questions is: “Do you practice Judaism? If so, how? If not, what credentials qualify you for writing about Jewish life for national magazines?”¹⁴ This question suggests that Wapter believes one must somehow prove one’s dedication to the Jewish people before having the credentials to be publicly Jewish. Of course, the manner in which one would prove one’s dedication, as implied in the statement, involves deference to current Jewish authority attitudes. Judge Wapter’s question thus seems to have more to do with perceived threats to the Jewish establishment itself than threats to the Jewish people.

¹³ Roth, *Reading Myself and Others*, 224.

¹⁴ Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, 103.

The idea of preserving the establishment status quo appears in another question: “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?”¹⁵ Regardless of whether the characters in Zuckerman’s story are accurately depicted or not, this question appears to express a desire on the part of Judge Wapter to maintain control of the image and status of Jewish leaders. Wapter’s complaint disregards any positive consequences that might emerge from creative expression of entirely fictional Jewish leaders or public exposure of folly in observed ones. Roth’s accusation is that Wapter, as other establishment figures, cares more about maintenance of the establishment system than the potential good that might come to the Jewish community through the work creative individuals such as Roth’s outsider characters.

Finally, Wapter presents Zuckerman with a question that suggests how one would properly depict Jewish community leaders: “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?”¹⁶ This is less a question than a proposition, that Zuckerman in his writing *should* provide heroic or inspiring images of Jewish leaders, if not exclusively than at least to effectively counterbalance the negative portrayals. Again, Wapter is performing what is presented as his duty as an establishment figure to maintain the status quo in terms of determining who is an acceptable authority on Jewish life.

Clearly, Roth’s literature expresses distaste for the kind of spiritual and secular leaders that comprise the Jewish establishment, as well as the moral self-righteousness and self-importance that characterizes them. For Roth, part of the fault lies in the Jewish

¹⁵ Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, 103.

¹⁶ Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, 103.

community, for enthusiastically doting upon these leaders, and for awarding the establishment immunity from criticism. The Jewish establishment-community relationship is furthermore fundamentally problematic, as Roth objects to any person who claims to have the right to represent Jews. Finally, Roth finds that establishment leaders are often more concerned with maintaining their of authority than taking care of Jewish community's needs. However, Roth's complaints regarding the Jewish establishment are more than just conceptual, as we will find practical consequences in the beliefs and principles held and disseminated by Jewish leaders in his literature.

The Case for the Individual

Philip Roth's criticism of the Jewish establishment is rooted in a disapproval of particular Jewish ideas and attitudes promoted by Jewish leaders. These leaders do not seem to speak to or represent his characters' thoughts, and are unable to adapt to changes in the thoughts and beliefs of the Jewish community. Roth's characters see the attitudes of establishment leaders on topics such as ideals of success, anti-Semitism, and attitudes toward non-Jews as inflexible, and worse, unduly imposed upon the larger community. Thus, Roth's characters develop attitudes of rebellion and defiance that suggest a desire to reclaim a more individualistic and independent spirit to their expressions and interpretations of Jewishness.

Roth's fiction contains criticisms of many of the norms created and regulated by Jewish leaders. One major criticism is of the Jewish establishment construction of success. In *Portnoy's Complaint*, Portnoy feels personally attacked by the Jewish community he grew up in because his conception of success does not fall within Jewish establishment guidelines. Portnoy feels he holds a legitimately respectable government position, as a civil liberties attorney, yet is haunted by the fact that his job does not garner the respect of his parents or his community. For example, Portnoy rages about how his father and Jews in his parents' generation fixate on a few occupations, specifically that of the musician and doctor: "Pianist! That's one of the words they just love, almost as much as *doctor*...And *residency*. And best of all, *his own office*. He opened his own office in Livingston."¹⁷ Here, the immunity from criticism granted by Jewish establishment acceptance reaches a darkly comic crescendo, as the pianist referred in Portnoy's tirade is a family friend who committed suicide but was never

¹⁷ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint*, 99.

questioned because his career was a fabulous success according to the Jewish establishment definition.

In another sequence, Portnoy imagines a conversation in which his mother outlines an exaggerated Jewish version of success. ““Do you remember Seymour Schmuck, Alex?”... “Well, I just met his mother on the street today, and she told me that Seymour is now the biggest brain surgeon in the entire Western Hemisphere. He owns six different split-level ranch-type houses... and belongs to the boards of eleven synagogues, all brand-new and designed by Marc Kugel.””¹⁸ Here, Portnoy’s criticism of the Jewish establishment definition of success is somewhat based on the inherent materialism of a system that rewards those who make career choices based on the potential for wealth and fame. By interspersing disparate images of Jewish establishment success, from property ownership to career achievement to synagogue leadership, all wildly exaggerated, Roth comically exposes the emptiness of such a construct. The result of this definition on Portnoy’s life is, however, more than concrete; Portnoy’s father uses arbitrary means to replicate this success in his son, for example, trying to get young Portnoy to follow in the footsteps of producer Billy Rose. As Portnoy explains, “Walter Winchell said that Billy Rose’s knowledge of shorthand had led Bernard Baruch to hire him as a secretary—consequently my father plagued me throughout high school to enroll in the shorthand course.”¹⁹ That the misguided attitudes of establishment leaders manifest themselves to the psychological detriment of Portnoy and his peers is a constant theme throughout the novel.

Another Jewish establishment construction that Roth slams is the Jewish attitude of petty hostility toward non-Jews. In *Portnoy’s Complaint*, Portnoy anguishes over the elders in his Jewish schools who preached an inequality irreconcilable with his burgeoning political

¹⁸ Roth, *Portnoy’s Complaint*, 99.

¹⁹ Roth, *Portnoy’s Complaint*, 26.

philosophy. This sentiment is best perhaps best illustrated in the outlook of Portnoy's high school regarding their football team: "So what if we had lost? ...we ate no ham. We kept matzo's in our lockers. Not really, of course, but if we wanted to we could...not only were we not inferior to the *goyim* [non-Jews] who beat us at football...We were Jews—and we were superior!"²⁰ The absurdity of the reasoning behind those feelings of superiority—that the students could keep 'matzo's' in their lockers—highlights the absurdity of the feelings themselves, inherited from the leaders of the Jewish community. This anti-gentile attitude was mixed in with what Portnoy describes as "the prevailing attitude toward athletics in general," that being, "it was for the *goyim*."²¹ Furthermore, Portnoy laments the bigoted attitude shown toward the high school's gentile baton twirler, who, though idealized by the students for her feminine qualities, could never be mentioned without reference to the frivolity of her 'goyish' ambitions. The consequence of the Jewish community's hostility toward non-Jewish elements, Portnoy implies, is that they later developed into Portnoy's twisted relationships with non-Jews, particularly in the area of sex.

Perhaps no Jewish establishment attitude is tackled so often in Roth's fiction as anti-Semitism, likely due to the fact that Roth has often been accused of fostering it himself. In Judge Wapner's response to "Higher Education," first and foremost is the complaint that Zuckerman's story has supposedly provided fuel for anti-Semites and thus historically seems to be a threat to Jewish communities.²² Roth makes reference in *Reading Myself and Others* to a letter received by the Anti-Defamation League in which a prominent New York City rabbi asks, in reference to Roth and his work: "What is being done to silence this man? Medieval

²⁰ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint*, 56.

²¹ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint*, 55.

²² Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, 103.

Jews would have known what to do with him.”²³ This was not a unique criticism; the common complaint raised against Roth’s writing by Jewish establishment figures and community members alike has been its supposed promotion of anti-Semitism. The accusations of Roth’s fostering anti-Semitism have, in fact, been scathing. Gershom Scholem wrote in the Israeli newspaper *Ha’aretz* a damning prediction: “with the next turn of history...This book will be quoted to us—and how it will be quoted! They will say to us: Here you have the testimony from one of your own artists...an authentic Jewish witness...I wonder what price *k’lal yisrael* [the world Jewish community]—and there is such an entity in the eyes of the Gentiles—is going to pay for this book. Woe to us on that day of reckoning!”²⁴ But even though Scholem’s opinion was received as extreme, Roth’s status as a Jew exposing negative elements of the Jewish community has resulted in the kind of “insider evidence,” as critic Alan Cooper puts it, that seems to be ripe for causing antagonism between Jews and non-Jews.

One example of a situation in *Portnoy’s Complaint* that unnerved some Jews for its exposing of “insider evidence” involves Portnoy’s involvement in helping uncover the TV quiz-show scandal, in which non-Jews were secretly fed answers in order to win against Jews to draw ratings. At one point, Portnoy expresses arguably anti-Christian delight at having helped unmask a wealthy gentile who participated in the scandal. It is important to note that the quiz-show scandal occurred in the real world, and the event in reality did seem to generate an amount of anti-Christian sentiment. As Cooper explains of critic Marie Syrkin’s concerns, “To have Portnoy admit to these vindictive feelings and to sharing his father’s exhortations about the absurdity of the whole Christian premise—feelings shared by a huge

²³ Roth, *Reading Myself and Others*, 216.

²⁴ Cooper, *Philip Roth and the Jews*, 110-11.

proportion of his Jewish readers! —is from Syrkin’s point of view dangerous to Jewish life in a pluralistic society.”²⁵

The quiz-show scandal is only one instance in *Portnoy’s Complaint* where antagonism between Jews and gentiles is detailed. Critics such as Syrkin leveled the charges that Portnoy’s desire for gentile women, a central theme in the novel, echoed the traditional cries of the anti-Semite, arguing “Portnoy’s lusts for *shikesas* [gentile women] were precisely what the traditional anti-Semite said all Jews felt, what the Aryan accused the would-be defiling Jew of trying to perpetrate.”²⁶ The charges against *Portnoy’s Complaint* thus seem to be twofold: the novel is dangerous for exposing Jewish attitudes that should not be publicized, and the novel is dangerous for inflating Jewish attitudes that are uncommon or unrepresentative.

Irving Howe’s “Philip Roth Reconsidered” expresses a concern for Roth’s empowerment of anti-Semites in a slightly different way. While making it clear that he does not feel *Portnoy’s Complaint* is necessarily an anti-Semitic book, Howe writes that Roth’s work helped end a two-decades-long “wave of philo-Semitism” that afflicted “some Gentile readers.” Howe then subtly accuses Roth of welcoming anti-Semites back into mainstream culture: “[O]ne no longer had to listen to all that talk about Jewish morality, Jewish endurance, Jewish wisdom, Jewish families. Here was...a writer who even seemed to know Yiddish, confirming what had always been suspected about those immigrant Jews but had recently not been tactful to say.”²⁷ Howe’s accusation is revealing on multiple levels. First, it substantiates that Roth’s major crime was breaking with topics and themes acceptable by establishment standards. Also, by imaginatively speaking as an anti-Semite referring to

²⁵ Cooper, *Philip Roth and the Jews*, 110.

²⁶ Cooper, *Philip Roth and the Jews*, 109.

²⁷ Howe, “Philip Roth Reconsidered”, 76.

“those immigrant Jews,” Howe reveals that part of the objection is generational, though Roth’s literature is very much about the children of immigrants—a generation where the concerns of “immigrant Jews” no longer apply. However, that such an eminent Jewish critic would slam Roth for choosing a path that could supposedly rejuvenate anti-Semites could not fare well with Jews after the Holocaust.

Even Norman Podhoretz, whose critiques of Roth have been much less antagonistic than Howe’s, expresses his sympathies with Roth’s detractors regarding this concern. Podhoretz writes, “Many of Roth’s critics “were old enough to have been exposed personally to the kind and degree of anti-Semitism from which Roth’s generation...had blessedly been spared... To them it seemed that with the Gentile anti-Semites finally forced to bite their tongues, a smart Jewish boy with a big dirty mouth had come along to take their place.”²⁸ What is consistent in Howe’s and Podhoretz’s criticism is the sense that Roth’s work was written carelessly, that Roth was somehow negligent in his duty as a Jew to examine the consequences of his writing to the community.

Such accusations of recklessness, however, are inconsistent with the simple fact that Roth as an author would care so much about the reading and interpretation of his work as to publish a book entitled *Reading Myself and Others*. In the essay “Writing about Jews,” Roth addresses the concerns of many critics of his writing who blame negative portrayals of Jews in literature, specifically his literature, for ills committed against Jews by anti-Semites. To begin, Roth addresses the claim of a direct correlation between negative or stereotypical portrayals of Jews in his work and anti-Semitic acts, a false accusation made by those such as the rabbi mentioned earlier. Regarding the rabbi’s contention, Roth asks, “Can he actually believe that on the basis of my story anyone is going to start a pogrom, or keep a Jew out of

²⁸ Podhoretz, “The Adventure of Philip Roth”, 28.

medical school, or even call some Jewish schoolchild a kike?”²⁹ The treatment of anti-Semitism as some sort of faceless, indescribable, and incomprehensible monster is precisely where Roth and the Jewish establishment split on the issue. Roth here blames some of his critics for exhibiting the kind of Jewish paranoia dealt with in books such as *Operation Shylock*, and it is not difficult to interpret the Rabbi’s suggestion that Roth publish his books in Israel in Hebrew so non-Jews would not be exposed as just that kind of paranoia.

In fact, to the contrary, Roth suggests that the conspicuous absence of Jewish characters or a Jewish struggle with morality helps perpetuate prejudices held by non-Jews: “the stereotype as often arises from ignorance as from malice; deliberately keeping Jews out of the imagination of Gentiles, for fear of the bigots and their stereotyping minds, is really to invite the invention of stereotypical ideals.”³⁰ Furthermore, these so-called protectors of the Jewish community, Roth argues, can only imagine two kinds of Gentile reading his stories in *The New Yorker*: “those who hate Jews and those who don’t know how to read very well,” adding, “If there are others, they can get along without reading about Jews.”³¹ Roth is explaining simply that it is not too difficult to read a general distrust of gentiles in the responses of the Jewish establishment to his work, an issue about which Roth has clearly thought a great deal.

Roth’s major defense in “Writing about Jews,” however, centers on his contention that the American Jewish community has internal battles to face that require open and honest discussion, not the silencing of anti-establishment Jewish voices. He remarks that the negative responses he received to his story “Defender of the Faith” were not so much a reaction to its potential effect on anti-Semites, but instead a response to “what is

²⁹ Roth, *Reading Myself and Others*, 223.

³⁰ Roth, *Reading Myself and Others*, 222.

³¹ Roth, *Reading Myself and Others*, 222.

immediately painful—and that is its direct effect upon certain Jews.”³² However, Roth reframes this emotional reaction as an unfortunate necessity, adding that the rabbi should have written a letter more on the lines of this message: “You have hurt a lot of people’s feelings because you have revealed something they are ashamed of.”³³ Here, Roth is asserting a belief that his voice does indeed speak to Jews who need to contend with problems of the Jewish community, that under the watchful eye of the Jewish establishment go dangerously unattended.

The idea that difficult issues facing the Jewish community must be confronted rather than suppressed, Roth argues, applies similarly to anti-Semitism. Dealing with anti-Semitism, Roth writes, must involve a healing process within the Jewish community: “ending persecution involves more than stamping out persecutors. It is necessary, too, to unlearn certain responses to them. All the tolerance of persecution that has seeped into the Jewish character—the adaptability, the patience, the resignation, the silence, the self-denial—must be squeezed out.”³⁴ For Roth, anti-Semitism must be understood at a deeper level for the sake of the healing of the Jewish community, and this process requires honest investigation by individual Jewish thinkers unrestrained by the Jewish establishment.

Roth also questions those who would censor his writing by raising questions about the nature of silencing Jewish voices. If the barrier that protects Jews from anti-Semitism in America begins to collapse, Roth writes, “we must do what is necessary to strengthen it...But not by putting on a good face...not by pretending that Jews have existences less in need of, and less deserving of, honest attention than the lives of their neighbors, not by

³² Roth, *Reading Myself and Others*, 223.

³³ Roth, *Reading Myself and Others*, 223.

³⁴ Roth, *Reading Myself and Others*, 220.

making Jews invisible.”³⁵ Here, Roth makes the point that allowing honest and open literature, even literature that addresses negative aspects of the Jewish community and depicts Jewish stereotypes, can lead to positive benefits for the Jewish community, benefits not entirely grasped by the self-interested Jewish establishment.

As an example, Roth compares his work to Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*—a book that some critics have charged with perpetuating African-American stereotypes. In Roth’s words, these critics “feel that Mr. Ellison’s work has done little for the Negro cause and probably has harmed it.” Roth responds, however, that this response “seems to place the Negro cause somewhat outside the cause of truth and justice.”³⁶ Like what is sometimes painful honest discussion of Jewish issues in literature, Roth believes that Ellison’s *Invisible Man* should be studied regardless of the negative reactions inspired in a few readers. Roth concludes, “That many blind people are still blind does not mean that Ellison’s book gives off no light.”³⁷ This metaphor seems to be a warning to Roth’s critics not to believe that a few anti-Semites getting their hands on *Portnoy’s Complaint* would overshadow the potential good of his work.

To long-time readers of Roth, however, it is clear that his writing has been greatly influenced by the scathing remarks and attempted censorship of Jewish establishment figures. In a 1984 interview with *The Paris Review*, Roth discusses the influence of Jewish establishment criticism on his approach to writing, and, ultimately, its effect on such works as *Portnoy’s Complaint* and the Zuckerman novels. For example, Roth chalks up the anger and repression expressed in these works not so much to his personal experiences growing up, but instead to Jewish establishment figures who attacked him when he began writing: “My

³⁵ Roth, *Reading Myself and Others*, 220.

³⁶ Roth, *Reading Myself and Others*, 223.

³⁷ Roth, *Reading Myself and Others*, 223.

own household environment...had its constraints, but there was nothing resembling the censorious small mindedness and shame-ridden xenophobia that I ran into from the official Jews who wanted me to shut up.”³⁸ In the interview, Roth asserts that the internal family structure of *Portnoy’s Complaint* is representative of the Jewish establishment’s response when faced with an outsider like Roth. Roth explains, “The moral atmosphere of the Portnoy household, in its repressive aspects, owes a lot to the response of persistent voices within the official Jewish community to my debut.”³⁹ Questioned about the Zuckerman novels, Roth responds, “I knew less about anti-Semitic repression from personal experience than I did about the repressions Jews practiced upon themselves, and upon one another, as a consequence of the history of anti-Semitism.”⁴⁰ Clearly, Roth’s greatest challenges as a writer have been internal struggles concerning the nature of Jewish authority and the Jewish establishment. Roth concludes “Writing about Jews” with a challenge to the authority of the Jewish world’s accepted leaders. He writes, “If there are Jews who have begun to find the stories the novelists tell more provocative and pertinent than the sermons of some of the rabbis, perhaps it is because there are regions of feeling and consciousness in them which cannot be reached by the oratory of self-congratulation and self-pity.”⁴¹

The issue of Jewish establishment attitudes toward anti-Semitism is dealt with extensively in *Operation Shylock: A Confession*, in which a character named Philip Roth goes to Israel to track down a mysterious impersonator promoting a bizarre return-to-Europe for Jewish immigrants. Before discussing the implications of Jewish establishment attitudes toward anti-Semitism in the novel, it is important to understand the pseudo-autobiographical context of the book. While Roth clearly designates this work to be a piece of fiction, in its

³⁸ Roth, *Reading Myself and Others*, 156.

³⁹ Roth, *Reading Myself and Others*, 156.

⁴⁰ Roth, *Reading Myself and Others*, 162.

⁴¹ Roth, *Reading Myself and Others*, 224-25.

opening pages *Operation Shylock* establishes that the author Roth and the central character Roth have very similar histories. For example, both share notoriety and an air of celebrity as the controversial authors of *Portnoy's Complaint*. As part of this blurring of identities, the character Roth's relationship to the Jewish establishment is often but not always equivalent to that of the author Roth, though the author Roth's thoughts about the Jewish establishment is often suggested.

In *Operation Shylock*, Roth uses the imposter Roth's organization Anti-Semites Anonymous and the imposter's girlfriend, a self-described 'recovering anti-Semite' named Wanda Jane Possesski, to explore establishment conceptions of anti-Semitism. Possesski gives different reasons at different times for her anti-Semitism, some of them comical and some of them serious. As a nurse in a cancer ward, Possesski says she first starting hating Jews because of the Jewish doctors who were wealthy and always going on vacation: "We're staying at the Ritz, we're eating at the Schmitz, we're going to back up a truck and empty out Gucci's."⁴² But the comic effect of Possesski's coming-out story as an anti-Semite becomes much more serious when Possesski begins to express anger and thus evokes the memory of very real and tragic manifestations of anti-Semitism: "Their money. Their wives. Those women. Those faces of theirs—those hideous Jewish faces...It got to the point that the resident, this one doctor, Kaplan, he didn't like to look you in the eyes that much—he would say something about a patient and all I saw were those Jewish lips."⁴³ Possesski's dehumanization of Jews to physical features reminds the reader of Nazi-era anti-Semitism, but somehow seems it seems incomplete. This expression of hatred noticeably lacks a trigger such as frustration with one's financial or family situation, or even feelings of nationalistic fervor or racial superiority. Posseski's anti-Semitism is a farce, deliberately constructed as

⁴² Roth, *Operation Shylock*, 93.

⁴³ Roth, *Operation Shylock*, 95.

evidence that America Jewish paranoia is a problem to be dealt with, that a cheerful nurse will not suddenly begin to hate Jews simply because it is in the nature of gentiles to do so. The Jewish establishment conception of a faceless, incomprehensible anti-Semitism that will inevitably arrive is seriously questioned here.

When Possesski describes the support group the impostor Roth has founded to help her and other anti-Semites, the 'real' Roth goes on a journey to try to understand what really prompted the founding of Anti-Semites Anonymous. Roth imagines his impostor categorizing and organizing anti-Semites in a hierarchy: "there are occasional anti-Semites who engage in nothing more than a little anti-Semitism as social lubricant at parties and business lunches; moderate anti-Semites, who can control their anti-Semitism and even keep it a secret when they have to; and then there are the all-out anti-Semites...who eventually are consumed by what turns out to them to be a progressively debilitating disease."⁴⁴ Though he finds some humor in the audacity of the organization's aims, 'Roth' does not ridicule his imposter. He seems to admit that his imposter has no better solution toward combating anti-Semitism than any other Jew, and that his imposter's naïve approach is simply the product of a Jewish community ill-prepared to deal with the problem. Roth's intention is to show us that, despite the necessity, the Jewish establishment has done little to help Jews deal with anti-Semitism intellectually and emotionally.

In a later chapter, Possesski confesses one last time the origins of her anti-Semitism: "Now, from A-S.A., I understand why else I hated them. Their cohesiveness, I hated that. Their superiority, what the Gentiles call greed, I hated that. Their paranoia and their defensiveness, always being strategic and clever—the Jews drove me crazy by just being

⁴⁴ Roth, *Operation Shylock*, 105.

Jews.”⁴⁵ Roth does not contest these claims; he responds with silence. Roth here is again exploring Jewish stereotypes by giving a voice to an enemy of the Jew, and allowing the deliberate emergence of dangerous arguments to which the Jewish establishment would respond with condemnations and cries for censorship. Instead of responding to Possesski’s libels on behalf of the reader, Roth forces the reader to actively assess the accusations. Had Possesski met too many ‘greedy’ Jewish doctors? Is she merely ignorant for condemning all Jews for the faults of a few, or is she responding to cultural problems that exist to some degree in the Jewish community? Roth wants us to at least consider the latter, and is in a way empowering the Jewish individual to deal actively with the difficult questions that arise.

Finally, *Operation Shylock* challenges Jewish establishment approaches to the State of Israel. At one point in *Operation Shylock*, Roth runs into a Palestinian college friend of his named George Ziad, who rages against American Jewry. Though Ziad clearly has a larger political agenda, his criticism of the Jewish establishment reads like, well, a Roth novel. The taboo criticisms of Jewish corruption Ziad espouses are often convincing enough that we wonder whether the character Roth feels he is looking into a mirror. For example, Ziad rages against what he sees as the inappropriate use of the Holocaust for political purposes, by both the State of Israel and the American Zionists who support Israel. Ziad tells Roth, “the American Jewish leaders who come here...these officials of the Jewish establishment...they say... ‘Don’t *tell* me how the Palestinians are oppressed...I cannot raise money in America with that. Tell me about how we are threatened, tell me about terrorism, tell me about anti-Semitism and the Holocaust!’”⁴⁶ Had the same criticism been leveled against Jewish fundraisers by Roth himself, instead of by a Palestinian and supposed enemy of the Jewish

⁴⁵ Roth, *Operation Shylock*, 231.

⁴⁶ Roth, *Operation Shylock*, 133.

State, one would hardly squint, but Roth here is giving a voice to a declared enemy of American Jewry—a clear violation of Jewish establishment rules.

Ziad himself, in fact, points out in his rage that criticism of Jews by non-Jews has been made a taboo by the Jewish establishment, a taboo he does not seem to realize he has broken: “All I know is that if a goy publicly insulted a Jew the way [the Jewish press] have publicly insulted you, the B’nai B’rith would be screaming from every pulpit and every talk show, ‘Anti-Semitism!’”⁴⁷ The character Roth is here made to question his own loyalty to the Jewish people, and whether his fights with the Jewish establishment have been as positive for Jews as Roth likes to claim.

Interestingly, Ziad’s hatred for Zionism and the American Jews who have supported the State of Israel has turned him into Roth’s greatest defender. Just as Zuckerman raged against Milton Appel, the literary critic of the Jewish establishment, in *The Anatomy Lesson*, Ziad rages against the self-righteousness of Roth’s Jewish critics: “All your life you have devoted to saving the Jews from themselves, exposing to them their self-delusions. All your life, as a writer, ever since you began writing these stories out at Chicago, you have been opposing their flattering self-stereotypes.”⁴⁸ Again, we observe ‘Roth’ trying to deal with such praises of his work from a character who appears to hold at least borderline anti-Semitic attitudes. Practically alone in Jerusalem, apart from the imposter, Roth unexpectedly finds Ziad, a devoted Palestinian nationalist, to be his best spokesman against the Jewish establishment. Ziad tells Roth, quite accurately, “You have been attacked for this, you have been reviled for this, the conspiracy against you in the Jewish press began at the beginning and has barely let up to this day.”⁴⁹ The idea that Roth had been attacked ever since his first

⁴⁷ Roth, *Operation Shylock*, 136.

⁴⁸ Roth, *Operation Shylock*, 136.

⁴⁹ Roth, *Operation Shylock*, 136.

short stories began to be published is, in fact, professed often in the essays compiled in *Reading Myself and Others*. Thus Ziad's defense of Roth here tends to make the reader want to accept Ziad as a credible source of criticism of the Jewish establishment.

On the other hand, Ziad's virulent attack on Zionism and the Jews in Israel often borders on unacceptable hatred, and the reader is asked to think about how the fictional Roth is responding to the adoption of his own criticism of Jews by a borderline anti-Semite. For example, Ziad rants about Israeli authority figures: "Power-mad Jews is what they are, is *all* that they are, no different from the power-mad everywhere, except for the mythology of victimization that they use to justify their addiction to power and their victimizing of *us*."⁵⁰ When Ziad here uses the word "us," we wonder whether Ziad is including Roth as a victim of the Jewish establishment along with Ziad's fellow Palestinians. Ziad essentially confronts Roth with the option of turning on Jewish authority by aligning himself with self-proclaimed enemies of the Jewish community, challenging Roth to be the ultimate outsider. However, the virulence of Ziad's hatred, faced with Roth's clear refusal to align with Ziad, seems to illustrate that there are constraints on acceptable degrees of outsidership, even for Roth. 'Roth' has passed the test, having shown that his concerns are with the Jewish community and not simply against the Jewish establishment. As critic Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky explains: "while Philip Roth remains oppositionally irreverent and fiercely individual, his loyalty to the Jews—and to his Jewishness—can no longer be doubted."⁵¹ Indeed, the writer Roth has used Ziad to demonstrate that individual voices of dissent countering establishment views might share some concerns with even avowed enemies of Jewish interests; however, those voices are not necessarily the enemies of the Jewish community.

⁵⁰ Roth, *Operation Shylock*, 133.

⁵¹ Rubin-Dorsky, "Philip Roth and American Jewish Identity: The Question of Authenticity", 102.

Ziad is mystified by Roth's refusal to break with the Jewish community completely because of the antagonism he has faced from the establishment, and berates Roth: "They have called you the filthiest names, charged you with the most treacherous acts of betrayal, and yet you continue to feel responsible to them, to fear for them, you persist, in the face of their self-righteous stupidity, to be their loving, loyal son."⁵² Roth does not disagree with Ziad; in fact, he does not respond at all, and we remember that just pages earlier Roth had confessed an obsession with Jews and made it clear that he could not break affiliation with Jews. Later in the novel, the character Roth ends up using Ziad to spy on the Palestinian Liberation Organization and Yasser Arafat for the Mossad, but he never counters Ziad's or anyone else's claims to corruption on the part of Jewish leadership. In this way, Roth asks us to actively assess if even individuals who hold anti-Semitic attitudes and beliefs have the right to raise questions about the behavior and actions of Jewish leaders. While one could argue the broader political implications of Roth's choices in *Operation Shylock*, Roth's interactions with Ziad clearly demonstrate that establishment fears that Jewish individualism inevitably spills into outright subversion of Jewish interests are overblown.

Roth's case for a greater sense of individualism among Jews becomes apparent when noting the flaws of Jewish establishment thinking in the area of Jewish issues such as conceptions of success, anti-Semitism, and attitudes toward non-Jews. It seems Roth's intention to highlight what is often a subtle closed-mindedness of Jews against antiestablishment thought by placing the voices espousing controversial beliefs in unexpected characters, and by having Roth's fictional self react to the voices in unexpected ways. What emerges is a compelling argument for Roth's outsidership that relies not so

⁵² Roth, *Operation Shylock*, 136.

much on shock tactics and propaganda but subtle and telling interactions between characters with surprising similarities to gradually break down the reader's defenses.

Critical Differences

While much of the Jewish mainstream quickly aligned itself against what it saw as negative portrayals of American Jewry in Roth's fiction, leaders from one area of the Jewish establishment were initially less inclined to do so: literary critics. Jewish publications such as *Commentary* and *Forward* have over the years published numerous academic articles regarding Roth's proper place in the realm of Jewish fiction, and such articles have had considerable influence on perceptions of Roth's fiction beyond the academic community. Thus, the question of Roth's outsidership as a Jewish writer can be analyzed through the lens of the literary critics who struggled with their own responsibilities as authority figures within the Jewish establishment and their positions as academics analyzing Roth's work as literature. Some have defended Roth from the very beginning, including the American Jewish writer Saul Bellow, who argued against those Jews "who feel that the business of a Jewish writer in America is to write public-relations releases, to publicizing everything that is nice in the Jewish community and to suppress the rest, loyally."⁵³ Bellow, who many characterized as leading the new generation of Jewish writers in Roth's time, stood by Roth's right to artistic license.

Others, however, have had more complex attitudes toward Roth's fiction. Norman Podhoretz, editor-at-large of the American Jewish Committee publication *Commentary*, for example, recently published an article detailing his shifting attitudes toward Roth's fiction over the years. Podhoretz is, in fact, credited with "discovering" Philip Roth, after publishing an unsolicited short story of Roth's entitled "You Can't Tell a Man By the Song He Sings" in 1957. Regarding *Goodbye, Columbus*, Podhoretz argues that the novel worked at the time it

⁵³ Podhoretz, "The Adventure of Philip Roth", 27.

was published because of its calculated degree of objectivity: "Obviously the work in question had to be sufficiently intimate with the still exotic American-Jewish experience to render it convincingly. But the author also had to be sufficiently distanced from this experience to write about it with a critical if not a jaundiced eye."⁵⁴ Podhoretz continues by praising Roth's realistic portraiture as a direct effect of Roth's "true" perspective on the American Jewish experience: "Roth could never have achieved so uncanny a degree of accuracy unless he had not only paid close attention to but had taken genuine delight in the world he was evoking."⁵⁵ Podhoretz here provides an argument for Roth's insidership as Jewish writer, claiming that Roth's intimacy with the characters he portrays in his early novels is evidence of his value as a Jewish writer.

Finally, Podhoretz argues that Roth redeemed himself completely in his Zuckerman novels, noting, "I detected a touch of tenderness toward his characters that had never been much in evidence before, and, what was even more startling, the same feeling extended to the Jews he had so relentlessly and exuberantly ridiculed in the books that had first brought him fame."⁵⁶ However, Podhoretz acknowledges that his small voice in defense of Roth in the aftermath of *Portnoy's Complaint* had been no match for the chorus of criticism from the non-academic Jewish world. According to Cooper, most Jewish writers expressing outrage at Roth's work consisted of "rabbinic and other Jewishly affiliated reviewers" who would not buy Roth's arguments regarding portrayals of Jews in art, instead considering his defense "smoke and mirrors."⁵⁷ These critics soon found an ally in the academic world in the revered Jewish establishment figure Irving Howe. Cooper points out the effects of Howe's "Philip Roth Reconsidered," the piece that Roth responded to in *The Anatomy Lesson*. This article,

⁵⁴ Podhoretz, "The Adventure of Philip Roth", 27.

⁵⁵ Podhoretz, "The Adventure of Philip Roth", 28.

⁵⁶ Podhoretz, "The Adventure of Philip Roth", 32.

⁵⁷ Cooper, *Philip Roth and the Jews*, 108.

published in *Commentary* in 1972, “gave the intellectual establishment a rationale for joining the chorus of moralists denigrating Roth’s achievement.”⁵⁸

In “Philip Roth Reconsidered,” Howe avoided some of the pitfalls that befell earlier critics, such as unjustified labeling of Roth as a traitor or anti-Semite. The overall goal of Howe’s criticism seems to be to tear American Jewish identity from the hands of Roth, as Howe spends much of the piece deriding the idea that Roth might have something important to say about Jews. For instance, Howe blasts Roth for including in his short story “Eli the Fanatic” a Jewish character who becomes confounded when his child relates to him the biblical story of the binding of Isaac because of his own ignorance. Howe writes, “Now even a philistine character has certain rights, if not as a philistine then at least as a character in whose ‘reality’ we are being asked to believe. To write as if this middle-class Jewish suburbanite were...shocked by the story of the near-sacrifice of Isaac, is simply preposterous.”⁵⁹ Regarding Roth’s portrayal of the suburbanite Patimkins in “Goodbye, Columbus,” Howe dismisses the family as wrenched from history and humanity and thus empty and meaningless: “their history is not allowed to emerge so as to make them understandable as human beings. Their vulgarity is put on blazing display but little or nothing that might locate or complicate that vulgarity is shown...nothing of the Jewish mania for culture...nothing of that fearful self-consciousness which the events of the mid-20th century thrust upon the Patimkins of this world.”⁶⁰ Both the philistine in “Eli the Fanatic” and the philistine Patimkins are, according to Howe, mere shells of characters, with little relevance to the Jews of reality. The implication, of course, is that Roth’s work does not and cannot speak to Jews.

⁵⁸ Cooper, *Philip Roth and the Jews*, 158.

⁵⁹ Howe, “Philip Roth Reconsidered”, 72.

⁶⁰ Howe, “Philip Roth Reconsidered”, 69.

Howe's other major criticism of Roth's work involves what he portrays as strong-arm tactics meant to cram messages down the throats of Roth's readers. Regarding Roth's "Conversion of the Jews," Howe makes reference to a point near the end of the story in which the main character Ozzie makes a grand declaration that "strains our credence; it is Roth who has taken over, shouldering aside his characters and performing on his own, just as it is Roth who ends the story with the maudlin touch of Ozzie crying out, 'Mamma. You should never hit anybody about God.'"⁶¹ Howe argues that in Roth's first-person narratives such as *Portnoy's Complaint*, the narrator "swarms all over the turf of his imaginary world, blotting out the possibility of multiple perspective," while in other stories, "his own authorial voice quickly takes over, becoming all but indistinguishable from a first-person narrator...and damned sure that the denouement of his story will not escape the grip of his will."⁶² These characterizations of Roth's writing parallel a standard criticism leveled at outsiders by established institutions: Roth is simply too reckless to be trusted, and cannot help but overstep his bounds.

Howe's attacks on Roth in "Philip Roth Reconsidered," go much further than mere criticism of Roth's work. By outlining a tradition of Jewish writers from Isaac Bashevis Singer to Bernard Malamud, and excluding Roth from his list, Howe seeks to establish Roth's work as being clearly outside the realm of Jewish writing. He explains: "Roth, despite his concentration on Jewish settings... has not really been involved in this tradition. For he is one of the first American-Jewish writers who finds that it yields him no sustenance, no norms or values from which to launch his attacks on middle class complacency."⁶³ Howe furthermore writes that Roth, while not writing out of Jewish self-hatred, constructs *Portnoy's*

⁶¹ Howe, "Philip Roth Reconsidered", 71.

⁶² Howe, "Philip Roth Reconsidered", 72.

⁶³ Howe, "Philip Roth Reconsidered", 75.

Complaint as merely an escape fantasy from Jewishness. "Portnoy," Howe writes, "is simply crying out to be left alone, to be released from the claims of distinctiveness and the burdens of the past."⁶⁴ This contention, of course, ignores the specific claims Portnoy makes and the targets of his anger, simplifying Portnoy's drama into a blind resentment directed at his ethnicity.

Finally, Howe attacks Roth's supposed posturing for a new, larger, unsophisticated audience, writing that Roth did not recognize that "simply to launch attacks on middle-class suburbia is to put oneself at the head of the suburban parade, just as to mock the uptightness of immigrant Jews is to become the darling of their 'liberated' suburban children."⁶⁵ Howe concludes "Philip Roth Reconsidered" with this final jibe: "Flaubert once said that a writer must choose between an audience and readers. Evidently Roth has made his choice."⁶⁶ However, Howe's criticism of Roth's early work did not go uncontested. Referring to Howe's contention that Roth has chosen to shift an unsophisticated audience, Podhoretz responds, "Lurking below Howe's explanation I spotted an atavistic remainder of the old assumption once shared by leftists and modernists alike that when a serious artist achieves popularity, he must have "sold out."⁶⁷ As for the claims that Roth's work holds little importance to the Jewish community at large, Rubin-Dorsky rejects this viewpoint entirely. "[Roth's] books imaginatively address the dilemmas and paradoxes of late-twentieth-century Jewish existence; and as they engage, interpret, and comment on Jewish history, culture, and conflict...they bring self and community together in a way that few, if any, of his early readers and critics would have thought possible," he writes.⁶⁸ However,

⁶⁴ Howe, "Philip Roth Reconsidered", 76.

⁶⁵ Howe, "Philip Roth Reconsidered", 75.

⁶⁶ Howe, "Philip Roth Reconsidered", 77.

⁶⁷ Podhoretz, "The Adventure of Philip Roth", 31.

⁶⁸ Rubin-Dorsky, "Philip Roth and American Jewish Identity: The Question of Authenticity", 102.

these relatively recent positive evaluations of Roth's writing are perhaps a matter of timing: decades after the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint*, a Jewish literary critic writing about Roth no longer has to worry about his responsibility as an authority in the Jewish community.

What we gain from examining this criticism is an understanding that Roth's outsider status is worth examination beyond simply acknowledging that his writing about Jews is controversial because it runs against establishment views. If we are to accept Howe's viewpoint, we understand that Roth is not so much an outsider as a non-participant in Jewish cultural tradition who has no special license to speak to the Jewish community. However, if we are to agree with Podhoretz's claims, as I do, Roth's outsidership is part of a special proximity to Jewish life that allows Roth to express a deep understanding of what it is to be part of the Jewish community with enough distance to achieve a degree of objectivity. Roth's conception of individualism among Jews is, in fact, dependent on the attainment of this kind of balance.

A Tale of Two Writers

Philip Roth's fiction, we have seen, creates conceptions of a Jewish community subscribing to establishment guidelines and outsiders questioning the authority and principles of establishment leaders. Roth, however, does not limit his explorations of outsidership and establishment to the Jewish world, and in *The Ghost Writer* he presents a model of the establishment-outsider dynamic that is of special significance to his conceptions of the roles and experiences of the Jewish outsider.

In the beginning of *The Ghost Writer*, the young writer and Roth stand-in Nathan Zuckerman visits the house of an obscure yet accomplished older writer, E. I. Lonoff, and so finds himself struggling with a barrage of choices to be made about his future life as a writer, an artist, an individual, and a Jew. Lonoff as a writer is the consummate outsider, religiously rejecting all forms of public and private admiration, and using his privacy and apparent selflessness to serve his small but elite readership. But Lonoff's outsidership as a writer is directly associated with his outsidership as a Jew from the very beginning of the novel. As he is shown into Lonoff's home, Zuckerman ponders the oddity that "a Jew of his generation, an immigrant child to begin with, should have married the scion of an old New England family and lived all these years "in the country,"—that is to say, in the *goyish* wilderness of birds and trees."⁶⁹ This outsidership, in turn, is linked with the breaking down of expectations. For example, Zuckerman writes with noticeable envy about how comfortable Lonoff seemed to be with himself: "With hands that were almost ladylike in the swiftness and delicacy of their movements, he hiked the crease in each trouser leg and took

⁶⁹ Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, 4.

his seat. He moved with a notable lightness for such a large, heavyset man.”⁷⁰ Zuckerman, on the other hand, refers to himself with labels that he is too quick to apply and unable to maintain; for example, as “an orthodox college atheist and highbrow-in-training.”⁷¹ Lonoff, on the other hand, “looked more like the local superintendent of schools than the region’s most original storyteller since Melville and Hawthorne.”⁷² The implication is that Zuckerman is forced to manufacture self-definition in order to provide an acceptable and consistent image, as might be characterized of establishment constructions, while Lonoff is comfortable with the truth of his appearance.

Lonoff, we soon come to understand, represents a breed of artist who martyrs himself for his work, dooming himself and his wife to a life of obscurity and misery so that his work can remain uncorrupted. Zuckerman makes clear the value of Lonoff’s self-decreed exile from humanity; for example, Lonoff’s marginality seems to keep his work original. Lonoff, according to Zuckerman, “had written a collection of short stories about wandering Jews unlike anything written before by any Jew who had wandered into America.”⁷³ In addition, Zuckerman wonders if Lonoff’s hermit-like existence contributes to the universal appeal of his prose: “The typical hero of a Lonoff story... seemed to say something new and wrenching to Gentiles about Jews, and to Jews about themselves, and to readers and writers... generally about the ambiguities of prudence and the anxieties of disorder, about life-hunger, life-bargains, and life-terror in their most elementary manifestations.”⁷⁴ In these observations we get a glimpse into the kind of targets Roth sets for himself in his own writing. Zuckerman’s description of Lonoff is consistent with the kinds of ideals Roth

⁷⁰ Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, 5-6.

⁷¹ Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, 11.

⁷² Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, 4.

⁷³ Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, 11.

⁷⁴ Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, 13-14.

presents are held by the Jewish outsider: to speak to and not for Jews, and to generate novel perspectives on familiar issues.

Lonoff's fight against popular and critical recognition is built into his artistic martyrdom, and thus any recognition of Lonoff's literary merit, even in the artist's own mind, is rejected. As Zuckerman notes, "having been "discovered" and popularized, [Lonoff] refused all awards and degrees, declined membership in all honorary institutions, granted no public interviews, and chose not to be photographed."⁷⁵ Within the Lonoff household, the unsaid truths of Lonoff's genius seem only to amplify Zuckerman's silent worship of the writer. For example, that Lonoff's unique treatment of his central characters is finally "monumentalized as "Lonovian" by *Time*—after decades of ignoring him completely"⁷⁶ only makes more apparent the fact that Lonoff's martyrdom is an effective way of creating art: "turning around sentences," as Lonoff refers to his painful process of writing. Lonoff's embrace of this more difficult avenue toward producing literature is reminiscent of Roth's insistence that Jews confront the painful realities in his work, suggesting that the literary outsider has much the same assignment as the Jewish outsider.

Zuckerman must also face a second literary career option, represented by the young Jewish writer and superstar Felix Abravanel. Abravanel is highly talented, and as a Jewish artist would likely be well received by Zuckerman's father and the Jewish establishment figure Judge Wapter, but to Zuckerman, Abravanel "in the flesh... gave the impression of being out to lunch."⁷⁷ Zuckerman's credentials as a Jewish insider, however, are ubiquitous. For example, Abravanel's girlfriend casually mentions to Zuckerman that Abravanel is seeing Sy Knebel, "the editor for twenty years of the New York intellectual quarterly that I had

⁷⁵ Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, 11.

⁷⁶ Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, 14.

⁷⁷ Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, 57.

been devouring for the past two.”⁷⁸ One imagines how Roth might respond to such name-dropping after having established himself as the consummate Jewish outsider: unimpressed. However, Zuckerman as a young Roth is still deciding upon which path he will embark upon in his career as a writer.

Zuckerman shows some admiration for Abravanel’s work, describing the young novelist “who could locate the hypnotic core in the most devious American self-seeker and lead him to disclose, in spirited locutions all his own, the depths of his conniving soul.”⁷⁹ Unlike Lonoff, however, Zuckerman sees Abravanel as stiff and unauthentic: “So genteel and assured and courtly was the posture he’d assumed... that I found myself doubting it.”⁸⁰ Likewise, Lonoff’s openness about his personal life seems the exact opposite of Abravanel’s position. Zuckerman writes that Abravanel’s “charm was like a moat so oceanic that you could not even see the great turreted and buttressed thing it had been dug to protect.”⁸¹ The question that is raised in Zuckerman’s mind, then, is whether he would be willing to martyr himself for his work or suffer forever by only showing the outside world a carefully constructed persona. Abravanel is, to Roth, a representation of the highly defended Jewish establishment, powerful and with great appeal yet ultimately empty of substance.

Just as Lonoff has fought to retain his status as an outsider, Abravanel has fought to retain his insidership, even at great personal cost. First, Abravanel as a writer is forced to censor himself constantly so as not to alienate his audience. In a lecture at the University of Chicago, for example, Zuckerman notes, “There were moments... when Abravanel had to pause at the lectern, seemingly to suppress saying something off the cuff that would have

⁷⁸ Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, 52-53.

⁷⁹ Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, 57.

⁸⁰ Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, 65.

⁸¹ Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, 58.

been just too charming for his audience to bear.”⁸² To contrast, Lonoff often makes frank and nearly provocative observations around Zuckerman, without any fear of alienating his guest. Even beyond his constant self-censorship, Abravanel has to use his status to suppress the creativity around him. As Zuckerman observes, Abravanel “reminded me, amid all those who would flatter and adore him, of a radio tower with its tiny red light burning high up to warn off low-flying aircraft.”⁸³ When Zuckerman is around Lonoff, on the other hand, Zuckerman notes that he is “in a sweat from the spotlight [Lonoff] was giving me to bask in.”⁸⁴ These comparisons again point to Abravanel as representative of the Jewish establishment, untouchable and always needing to keep up appearances, while Lonoff as the outsider is approachable and always prepared to confront a person or situation.

Zuckerman is extremely careful to show us that Abravanel’s work is not entirely negative, but the product of specific choices Abravanel had made in his rise as a writer. Zuckerman, in introducing us to Abravanel, writes this of his literary work: “every page packed as tight as Dickens or Dostoevsky with the latest news of manias, temptations passions, and dreams, with mankind aflame with feeling.”⁸⁵ This somewhat empty description is not so different from Zuckerman’s early introduction to Lonoff’s work, in which he writes that Lonoff’s literature functions “as though the hallucinatory strains in Gogol had been filtered through the humane skepticism of Chekhov.”⁸⁶ However, Zuckerman quickly admits that these descriptions are somewhat meaningless, and that Lonoff’s true power is not from what could be discovered from close reading but from what the reader picks for his or herself. Zuckerman continues, “Or so I argued in the college essay

⁸² Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, 58.

⁸³ Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, 59.

⁸⁴ Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, 46.

⁸⁵ Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, 57.

⁸⁶ Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, 12-13.

where I “analyzed” Lonoff’s style but kept to myself an explication of the feelings of kinship that his stories had revived in me for our own largely Americanized clan.”⁸⁷ The power of Lonoff is in the way he is able to touch Jewish individuals who feel disconnected with the Jewish establishment, as Roth seems to want.

The emotional power of Roth’s depictions of Lonoff and Abravanel lies in that they place us in the shoes of a youth who must choose whether to safely follow establishment guidelines to literary success or take the more difficult outsider’s route that could lead to perhaps more powerful and substantive work. The emotional difficulty of the choice between the paths of eternal outsidership or establishment acceptance is exactly what Roth presents the Jewish reader in his fiction. Clearly, Roth favors the former, but he is honest in depicting the attractive trappings of establishment-sanctioned success: a beautiful wife, adoring fans, unquestioned authority. Through Zuckerman the Jewish reader is able to experience the emotional difficulty of such a decision and thus better understand the sacrifice and rewards of Jewish individualism.

⁸⁷ Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, 13.

Conclusion

Roth's treatment of outsidership and the Jewish establishment in literature, as well as his responses to criticism by establishment figures, directs us to consider the benefits of greater emphasis on Jewish individualism that questions the authority of a small minority of leaders. Works such as *Portnoy's Complaint* further implicate the Jewish community in its willingness to accept such leaders without reservation, and for allowing these leaders to be immune from criticism, even when the community would clearly benefit from open and honest self-evaluation.

Part of the reason that Roth's work continues to speak to Jews is that individualism and outsidership allow an evolving community to deal with changes that are not necessarily handled well by an elite group from a previous generation. The history of the Jewish in America has so far been a story of upward social mobility, coincident with a rise in political and cultural influence. Thus, the needs of Jews have changed immensely since the first generation of European immigrants. Issues that confront the Jewish community in America today include how to deal with an anti-Semitism that tries to conceal itself in anti-Zionism, how to preserve the memory of the victims of the Holocaust when the events now seem so distant, and how to maintain cultural integrity in the face of such rapid intermarriage and assimilation. The solutions to these problems are not necessarily the same as solutions to Jewish problems of the past, and thus the creativity of the Jewish individual must be harnessed. Roth's articulations of a dominant Jewish establishment obsessed with maintaining control are in itself a problem that the Jewish community continues to face.

One might note, however, that the Jewish community and the Jewish establishment have changed quite a bit since *Portnoy's Complaint* was published. Assimilation into American

society has left the American Jewish community fragmented and much less committed to the beliefs and ideals held by the first generation of immigrants. The Jewish establishment often seems much more concerned with American politics than the Jewish community, and has struggled to assert itself in this era of tolerance for all beliefs. The Jewish outsiders that one might identify today are those with extremist political beliefs, such as Norman Finkelstein and Adam Shapiro. Many Jews would argue that the major contribution to society of these individuals has been simply to demonstrate that free speech is overprotected in America. However, one wonders what the impact of a Jewish artist unsatisfied with the cultural and social direction of Jews in America might be today, or if the time has simply passed for the kind of antiestablishment arguments that Philip Roth presents. Perhaps further exploration into the topic of establishment and outsidership might explore other cultures and artists, such as Salman Rushdie and the Islamic world community. Or perhaps there are some aspects of American Jewish life that make Roth's work uniquely Jewish. Either way, there is no question that Roth's impact on the Jewish community as a fiercely independent writer has been enormous, and than examining Roth's conceptions of establishment dynamics can be a powerful tool toward understanding the American Jewish community.

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