EXPLAINING THE SELF: A CONTEXTUAL STUDY OF
SAUL BELLOW, PHILIP ROTH AND JOSEPH HELLER.

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PhD THESIS

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON
ABSTRACT

I offer an exploration of the work of these three contemporary novelists, focusing on the phenomenon of self-explanation - both in the sense of justifying oneself, and of seeking to define the nature of selfhood. I identify three roles in which (and against which) these self-explanations take place: as writers of comedy, as Jewish writers, and as American writers. Although these roles overlap, I treat them as distinct for the purposes of structural clarity and contextualise them by locating them in related literary and cultural traditions. I am particularly concerned with the ambivalent attitudes that these writers display towards these roles; with the tensions between - and within - their theory and practice.

The thesis is divided into three chapters, framed by an introduction and conclusion. Each chapter begins with a survey of some of the meanings attached to the terms "comedy", "Jewish" and "American" as generic labels, before moving on to a detailed analysis of a number of texts (by Bellow, Roth and Heller, and by others whose work shares these contexts) informed by these meanings. These close readings, which form the heart of the thesis, are divided within each chapter into three sections (one for each of the three writers).

Though contextual rather than comparative in emphasis, cumulatively the thesis provides an evaluation of their works, both in relation to each other and in terms of their larger literary-historical significance.
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For my parents, Jacob and Irène Brauner, and my wife, Anne Button.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to take this opportunity to thank all those who have helped me complete this thesis. I am particularly indebted to the British Academy, for the Major State Studentship that enabled me to survive financially, to my supervisor, Danny Karlin, for his sensitive and careful reading of my work, and to my father, Jacob Brauner, for his help with logistical computing problems. In addition, I would like to thank Dan Jacobson, for his helpful comments on some of my early chapter drafts, and Peter Swaab, Henry Tang, Lisa Fields and Juliet John, for their words of wisdom. Above all, however, I would like to thank Anne Button, for her moral and intellectual support, and for the love she has given me over the past two years.
INTRODUCTION: EXPLAINING THE SELF

You can never explain yourself enough. 

(Heller 1995)

You seem always to feel that you have to explain what nobody is asking you to explain - your right to be ... 

(Roth 1988a: 193)

Inquire a little and I'll tell you all. I was still explaining myself in full to people who couldn't have cared less. 

(Bellow 1975a: 483)

It seems only appropriate for a project which focuses on self-explanatory strategies to begin with an explanation of itself.

Perhaps the best place to start is with the title. By the phrase "Explaining the Self" I mean to indicate an interest in self-explanation in two different (but related) senses: the practice of defending, justifying, or vindicating oneself; and the attempt to describe, characterise, or define what a self, or the self is, or might be. The study is "contextual" structurally and methodologically, I hope that the contexts I offer are illuminating, but of course they do not pretend to be all-encompassing (my critical strategies are eclectic and pragmatic, rather than systematic or dogmatic). In each of the three main chapters, I concentrate on one context - comedy, Jewishness, Americanness (though they clearly overlap, I treat them as distinct for the purposes of structural clarity) to whose significance the authors themselves and/or others have

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1 In my use of the term "explanation" I deliberately exploit the ambiguity that David-Hillel Ruben draws attention to: "in speaking of an explanation, one might be referring to an act of explaining, or to the product of such an act" (Ruben 1990: 7). Similarly, I intend the word "explaining", as used in the titles of the three chapters of the thesis, to be understood as a description both of an activity characteristic of the authors in their guises as comedians, Jews, and Americans, and of their attempts to define the nature of comedy, Jewishness, and Americanness.
drawn attention. Through a series of close readings of a number of central texts, I
discuss the ways in which these writers' self-explanations encourage or discourage,
clarify or obscure, such contextualisation. Each chapter is divided into four sections,
one devoted to each of the writers, and an introductory section that examines some of
the possible significations of the terms "comic", "Jewish", and "American",
respectively.

It remains to explain my choice of writers. They obviously have in common the
contexts which I explore: they are contemporary American-Jewish comic novelists.
There are many others who fall into this category however (Malamud, Elkin, Friedman
etc.), so why these three? Partly out of personal interest, certainly; but also because of
the similarities and contrasts in their careers and in their literary reputations.

Whereas Harold Bloom is able to write with confidence, in his introduction to
the Modern Critical Views volume devoted to Bellow, that "the canonical status of
Bellow is already assured" and, moreover, "By general critical consent, Saul Bellow is
the strongest American novelist of his generation" (Bloom 1986: 1), no such consensus
can be found regarding Roth and Heller. While Bellow has amassed a huge body of

\[2\] A view echoed by Keith Opdahl, who calls him "our leading novelist" (Opdahl 1970: 3), by John Bayley, for whom Bellow is "the first American novelist of his generation to raise both the special problems and the special possibilities of post-war fiction" (Bayley 1975 in Bloom 1986: 102), by Malcom Bradbury, who sees Bellow as a "great modern novelist" (Bradbury 1978 in Bloom 1986: 146), by Josephine Hendin, for whom "Bellow is easily our finest elegiac and nostalgic writer" (Hendin 1979: 110), by Irving Howe who calls Bellow "the best living American novelist" (quoted in Harris 1980: 33), by Allen Guttman, who argues that "no American novelist since Melville has dared more successfully than Bellow to dramatize the intellectual life" (Guttman 1987 in Cohen 1987: 127), by Robert Alter, who nominates Bellow as "the strongest American stylist since Faulkner" (Alter 1994: 38), by Philip Roth, for whom he is "the country's most accomplished working novelist" (Roth 1985b: 280), and by Martin Amis, who delivers this panegyric:

whereas the claim of his contemporaries remain more or less unresolved, Saul
Bellow really is a great American writer. I think that in a sense he is the writer
that the twentieth century has been waiting for ... Bellow has made his experience
resonate more memorably than any living writer.

(Amis 1986: 200)
criticism (there are over thirty books devoted solely to him, as well as countless articles and sections of books, and the *Saul Bellow Journal*), and there has been a steady stream of work on Roth, critical attention to Heller, after a glut of articles on *Catch-22* in the sixties and early seventies, has been dwindling ever since (James Nagel's observation, made ten years ago, still applies: "well over half the important criticism on Heller is addressed to his sensational first novel" [Nagel 1984: 1]).

Why this disparity in status? Partly, perhaps, it is due to the volume of their output (to date, in book form, Bellow has published nine novels, two collections of short stories, four novellas, a book about Israel, a play, and a collection of essays; Roth twelve novels, three novellas, a collection of short stories, a satire, a collection of essays, and a memoir of his father; Heller six novels, two plays, and an account of his struggle with Guillain-Barré syndrome, co-authored with Speed Vogel); partly to its quality (certainly neither Bellow nor Roth has written anything as poor as Heller's sections of *No Laughing Matter*, or *Closing Time*; nor, arguably, on the other hand, have they written anything as powerful as *Something Happened*), but certainly a great deal to do with the mysterious workings of the literary establishment. Not only has Bellow been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, he has also won the Gold Medal for the Novel (an award given once every six years by the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters), the National Book Award on three occasions (the only novelist to have done so), the Pulitzer Prize once, and has been made a commander of the Legion of Honour in France (not to mention a host of other, less prestigious honours). Roth won the National Book Award for his first collection of stories and has twice received the National Book Critics Circle Award. Heller has no major literary awards to his name.
Why the yoking of Heller with Roth and Bellow, then? Precisely because Heller - although ostensibly possessing the same credentials as the other two (he is a contemporary comic Jewish-American novelist) does not seem to be so readily accommodated within the boundaries of such categories; because as a writer he seems to exist on the periphery of the literary establishment, rather than at its centre. Whereas Roth and Bellow are frequently bracketed together (with Bernard Malamud usually making up the third member of a triumvirate whose currency in literary criticism is such that Bellow is moved to "wonder whether Philip Roth and Bernard Malamud and I have not become the Hart, Schaffner & Marx of our trade" [Bellow 1974: 72]) and clearly have much in common (although I hope that the thesis challenges as much as it confirms their kinship), Heller is rarely mentioned in the same breath and his connection with the other two is problematic. In choosing to study two writers (Bellow and Roth) whose work is often seen as belonging to a common school of Jewish-American writing alongside a writer (Heller) whose work and whose personal recalcitrance seems to strain against such contextualisation - a writer whose status is questionable, who does not belong in the way that the other two do - I hope to explore a range of writing that will test the uses and limitations of the contexts which I offer and stretch fully the premises of similarity implied by the labels which they share.

In the rest of this introduction, I will attempt to elaborate briefly on the critical status of each writer in turn, and on their attitudes to self-explanation.2a

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2a Throughout the thesis, my interest is in the uses my authors make of self-explanations - their constructions and explanations of themselves and of selfhood, and of the relationship between the two. Where other models or definitions of selfhood seem peculiarly relevant, I refer to them, but I make no attempt to provide a definition of the self.
Saul Bellow

As Peter Hyland points out in the most recent critical study of Bellow, the acclaim that has rained down on Bellow has been precipitated at least partly by conditions in the literary climate, which have in turn been influenced by a select band of academics, critics and writers:

The American literary establishment, for very good reasons, selected Bellow as the quintessential American writer of the post-war period. In doing so they constituted him as a national icon, and it is possible that many people buy his books because he is Bellow, a man who, as bearer of the weight of the Great American Tradition in fiction, yokes together the disparities that make up contemporary American experience, and represents American aspirations. If this is true, he has become an object to be possessed as much as a thinker to be read. Bellow's popularity, that is, may well be a product of the idea of his being "the major post-war American novelist."

(Hyland 1992: 2)

Certainly much of Bellow's commercial success (since Herzog - which became a huge best-seller in America in 1964 - and the award of the Nobel Prize twelve years later, his books have sold consistently well) is down to the way he has been feted as an important writer (I suspect that there are many more Bellows bought than read, and

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3 Others have put it more cynically. John Leonard, writing in the New York Times, claimed that "If Saul Bellow didn't exist, someone exactly like him would have had to be invented ... by New York intellectuals" (quoted in Kiernan 1989: 6), while Mark Harris, in his book Saul Bellow Drumlin Woodchuck (which, although it is not a critical study as such, contains some of the best incidental criticism of Bellow to be found anywhere), has this to say on the subject of Bellow's awards:

"Prizes" may not be judgments of work but judgments of judgements, judgments of captions, judgments of other prizes. Almost no critics in a commercial milieu are capable of resisting prior commercial judgment.

(Harris 1980: 13)
many more started than finished). In making the further point that Bellow has become
an American cultural icon and the representative of a Great Tradition, however,
Hyland omits to mention the pejorative connotations of this mantle. What exactly the
establishment's "very good reasons" for their nomination of Bellow as their champion
were, Hyland does not say, but Bellow's political conservatism - that has increased
with age - may well have been one of them. In novels like Mr. Sammler's Planet and
The Dean's December, in numerous occasional journalistic pieces, and - perhaps most
notoriously - in his foreword to Allan Bloom's The Closing of the American Mind,
Bellow has spoken out against what he sees as the dilution and deterioration of
the great Western cultural tradition and has thus become a bogeyman for the more radical
elements within the American academy. Caught in the cross-fire of debates over
Eurocentrism and the canon, Bellow has been accused of cultural elitism, racism and
misogyny. Whether this is the beginning of a critical backlash or merely a symptom of
a transient zeitgeist, only time will tell.

4 My own experience of Bellow readers bears out Gerhard Bach's observation that
"Where critics have praised, readers have expressed exasperation and, worse,
boredom" (Bach 1991: 3). I tend to agree with Mark Harris, who suggests that

Bellow as best-seller may be a trick of sociology. I cannot otherwise explain it.
People expect from his books the wrong kind of joy. Booksellers have told me
that he sells very fast to a disappointed public.

(Harris 1980: 36)

5 It is the last of these charges that has been voiced most frequently. From Leslie
Fiedler, who argues that Bellow's women "tend to be nympholeptic projections"
(Fiedler 1969: 7), to Harold Bloom, who calls them "the wish-fulfiments, negative as
well as positive, of... [their] creator" (Bloom 1988: 1), to Ruth Miller, who laments
that they are "only instruments in a man's quest for identity" (Miller 1991: 46), the
critical consensus seems to be that women occupy subordinate positions in Bellow's
fiction (although there are female protagonists in two short stories -"Dora" and
"Leaving the Yellow House" - and one novella - A Theft). In particular, Bellow is
accused of reproducing hoary female stereotypes. Robert Baker, for example, claims
that "The female figures in his novels tend to fall into one of two categories: they are
either nags or nymphomaniacs" (Baker 1957: 109) - a view echoed by Frank
Whitehead, for whom they "are too often relegated to one of two categories: on the
one hand the domineering and persecuting wife or ex-wife; on the other the
A comprehensive survey of Bellow criticism would require a thesis in itself, but there are several perennial complaints that seem worth considering. One is that Bellow, who studied as an anthropologist, is a novelist more by design than by vocation - "a novelist in spite of himself" (Geismar 1958 in Malin 1969: 10) - and that his books therefore lack many of the attributes that we expect from novels. Frank McConnell observes that Bellow is "Not a great natural storyteller" (McConnell 1977 in Bloom 1986: 110), Alfred Kazin that he is "not a very dramatic novelist, and unexpected actions tend to be dragged into his novels ... as a way of interrupting the hero's reflections" (Kazin 1971 in Pinsker 1982: 101) and Keith Opdahl, that "Plot in Bellow's work is hard-won" (Opdahl 1979: 17). Earl Rovit perceives in the novels "a tendency towards wearying sameness ... an even consistency which resists discrimination and makes for monotony" (Rovit 1965 in Malin 1969: 181). For Rovit, the problem is that Bellow is more concerned with ideas than narrative and consequently has "trouble finding plot circumstances that are strong enough to carry off the burden of his intellectual concerns" (Rovit 1978 in Bloom 1986: 126). For other critics, however, these intellectual concerns are themselves flimsy or bogus.

glamorously attractive mistress, the sex-object of male fantasy" (Whitehead 1991 in Ford 1991: 527). This may be part of a larger problem of characterisation. Norman Podhoretz finds Bellow's characters "one-dimensional: they exhibit not individuality but peculiarity" (Podhoretz 1953 in Trachtenberg 1979: 16); Robert Dutton argues that Bellow "uses character in the old allegorical tradition: to dramatise a preconceived idea" and that he "stereotypes his people through caricature" although "these figures nevertheless have a vitality that refuses to be contained within a stereotype (Dutton 1982: 178, 181). On the other hand, Victoria Sullivan states flatly "Saul Bellow is not a sexist" (Sullivan 1975 in Rovit 1975: 101), Ada Aharoni claims that Bellow "has given us a vast and rich gallery of convincing and vivid women of all kinds" (Aharoni 1983 in Bloom 1988: 95) and Robert Penn Warren argues that "As a creator of character, Saul Bellow is in the great tradition of the English and American novel, he has the fine old relish of character for character's sake" (Warren 1953 in Trachtenberg 1979: 13). For a detailed examination of Bellow's representation of women, see Joseph F. McCadden's *The Flight From Women in the Fiction of Saul Bellow*. 
Robert Boyers rejects the intellectual arguments in Bellow's work as "confusion presented as complex wisdom ... a series of rejections of specious idea constructs which is itself thoroughly founded on intellectual quirkiness and easy indulgence" (Boyers 1973 in Trachtenberg 1979: 129), Melvin Maddocks finds Bellow's philosophising facile - "At worst, he can sound like Daddy Warbucks trying to explain Spinoza" (Maddocks 1959 in Trachtenberg 1979: 25) - and Frank Whitehead claims that "the 'ideas' as they are presented [in Herzog] turn out to be irredeemably banal and platitudinous" (Whitehead 1991 in Ford 1991: 519).

What seems to vex Bellow critics most, however, is not the question of whether his ideas have any intellectual merit, but the manner in which they are presented. Trachtenberg accuses Bellow of solipsism (he speaks of "characters indistinguishable from the authorial voice, whose narrow consciousness of a world displaces its portrayal through an independent perspective") and evasiveness ("it is often difficult to determine who or what is the object of [his] laughter and where responsibility lies for the comic vulnerability it exposes" [Trachtenberg 1979: xiv, xii]); Irving Howe is "unable, at times, to grasp which of the letters [in Herzog] are serious, that is, Bellow's opinions" (Howe 1964 in Trachtenberg 1979: 32); Norman Podhoretz finds it "extremely difficult ... to determine how often and how much he [Bellow] takes Augie at face value" (Podhoretz 1953 in Trachtenberg 1979: 15); Robert Boyers complains that "we have no way of discerning just where Bellow's perspective deviates from Sammler's" (Boyers 1973 in Trachtenberg 1979: 126); Daniel Hughes finds that "Bellow's comedy is not ultimately critical of its protagonist" (Hughes 1960 in Malin 1969: 87); Peter Hyland observes that "since the voice he [Augie] speaks with often sounds as if it might be Bellow's own it is difficult to judge the extent to which he has authorial approval" (Hyland 1992: 34), and Frank Whitehead writes that "it is hard to see [Herzog] ... as much more than a stalking-horse from behind which Bellow can vent some embittered personal grievances", of "our mystification as to how seriously we are to take Dahfu's curiously hybrid philosophising", of "an adulteration of the
created character with the voice and views of the author [in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*]
and that mystical ideas in Bellow "are presented in a distinctly eccentric way-out
form ... which enables Bellow to float them with an apparent hint of seriousness and
yet avoid any commitment to them" (Whitehead 1991 in Ford 1991: 518, 522, 526,
528). Even those who praise him most extravagantly seem to agree on this point:
Josephine Hendin acknowledges that "Bellow's brilliance as a novelist is eclipsed only
by his sentimental infatuation with his characters" (Hendin 1979: 103), Ruth Miller
claims that "The names [of the protagonists] do not matter, all are simulacra of the
writer himself" (Miller 1991: 334), and Harold Bloom concedes that Bellow's
"narrator-heroes ... are diffuse beings, possibly because Bellow cannot disengage from
them" (Bloom 1986: 2).

As this last comment suggests, the suspicion that Bellow identifies very closely
with his heroes derives partly from the preponderance in his work of first-person
narratives, in which the heroes are also the narrators. More than this, however, they
are almost invariably male intellectuals (sometimes writers) whose views often seem to
echo Bellow's own, sometimes literally. Bellow has responded defensively to such
criticism. In his foreword to Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*
(which reads more like an apologia for his own fiction than an introduction to Bloom's ideas), he takes the opportunity to clarify his relationship to Herzog.

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6 And to criticism in general. In an article entitled "Deep Readers of the World, Beware!" he expresses a fundamental skepticism of the usefulness of literary criticism and his attitude towards his own critics has been distinctly testy. In a *Paris Review* interview, he claimed to "have the blind self-acceptance of the eccentric who can't conceive that his eccentricities are not clearly understood" (Bellow 1966b: 61). Yet his own attempts to set the record straight do not always clarify matters. In the same interview he states that "There are advantages in not being taken too seriously" and complains that he is not taken seriously enough - "I felt that my fooling [in *Henderson the Rain King*] was fairly serious" (Bellow 1966b: 61, 64).
Some felt that they were being asked to sit for a difficult exam in a survey course in intellectual history and thought it mean of me to mingle sympathy and wit with obscurity and pedantry.

But I was making fun of pedantry!

(Bellow 1987c in Bloom 1987: 16)

However, he also observes that "It is risky in a book of ideas to speak in one's own voice, but ... the sources of the truest truths are inevitably profoundly personal" (Bellow 1987c in Bloom 1987: 12). Ten years earlier he had told Jo Brans that Herzog possesses "a kind of self-critical comic sense, an amused objectivity towards himself, almost amounting to courage" (which is precisely how Herzog sees himself) and that "Sammler would have been a better book if I had dealt openly with some of my feelings, instead of filtering them through him" (Bellow 1977 in Trachtenberg 1979: 64, 68). On the one hand, Bellow seems to be distancing himself from his heroes (Herzog's pedantry is not his); on the other, conceding that his own ideas are "filtered" through them and, moreover, implying that this is not going far enough, that a writer ought to speak directly to the reader "in one's own voice". Where does this leave fiction? Martin Amis, in an essay on Bellow, writes:

The present phase of Western literature is inescapably one of 'higher autobiography', intensely self-inspecting. The phase began with the spittle of Confessionalism but has steadied and peristed. No more stories: the author is increasingly committed to the private being.

(Amis 1986: 200)

Yet for Bellow his private being is not his alone - it is a medium through which a larger consciousness is filtered.
I began to realize [on receiving letters from readers, claiming that Bellow had expressed their thoughts] ... that I was on loan to myself ... that I was doing something that expressed common needs, common preoccupations.

(Bellow 1977 in Trachtenberg 1979: 57)

This is Bellow's defense against charges of self-indulgence and solipsism - a quasi-mystical sense of vocation, a presumption of "the psychic unity of mankind" (Bellow 1954: 100), or, in the words of Conrad (words which Bellow quoted in his Nobel acceptance speech) "the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts" (Bellow 1994: 89). Paradoxically, then, Bellow suggests that an exploration of an individual consciousness, a retreat into the self, leads not to alienation, but to a revelation of connection:

The feeling individual appeared weak - he felt nothing but his own weakness. But if he accepted his weakness and his own separateness and descended into himself, intensifying his loneliness, he discovered his solidarity with other isolated creatures.

(Bellow 1994: 89)

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7 Hattie, the protagonist of one of Bellow's short stories, "Leaving the Yellow House", uses almost exactly the same phrase to describe her sensation that she "had gradually become a container for myself". "I was never one single thing anyway", she explains, "I was only loaned to myself" (Bellow 1969: 33). Elsewhere, Bellow speaks of being "on a mission of an esoteric sort ... convinced that I had something of importance to declare, express, transmit" (Bellow 1994: 124).

8 Bellow reprises this phrase almost forty years later, in the Foreword to Something to Remember Me By, where he remarks:

Perhaps the writer has no actual public in mind. Often his only assumption is that he participates in a state of psychic unity with others not distinctly known to him. The mental condition of these others is understood by him, for it is his condition also.

(Bellow 1993: ix)

In this, as in his belief in the existence of the soul, Bellow's thought may be described as Jungian (in The Undiscovered Self, for example, Jung suggests that "Despite all the differences, the unity of mankind will assert itself irresistibly" [Jung 1958: 105]).
Time and again, Bellow's isolated protagonists struggle to establish their common humanity - to explore a kinship, literal or metaphorical - with other isolated creatures (Leventhal with Allbee, Wilhelm with his father and Tamkin, Henderson with Dahfu, Sammler with Lal, Citrine with Humboldt, Albert Corde with his wife, Minna, Kenneth Trachtenberg with his uncle, Benn Crader, Harry Fonstein with Billy Rose), but it is a struggle that tends to end in frustration, irresolution, or rejection. Ultimately, the need to explain the self outweighs the need to bond with the other, self-communion displaces communion.

Several critics have remarked on the prominence in Bellow of what Keith Opdahl calls "his quest for an essential self", but they cannot agree on the nature of the quest or on its outcome (Opdahl 1970: 26). Marcus Klein interprets Bellow's fiction as recommending that we "meet with a strong sense of self the sacrifice of self demanded by social circumstance" (Klein 1962 in Malin 1969: 92). Tony Tanner claims that Bellow's heroes "feel that both to have and to lack a defining, confining sense of identity threatens a form of death" (Tanner 1976: 70); Robert Boyers suggests that they cannot take "the decision to pursue selfhood apart from the more general responsibilities social reality customarily enjoins upon us" (Boyers 1973 in Trachtenberg 1979: 135), and Malcom Bradbury writes of their search for "a therapeutic selfhood" (Bradbury 1978 in Bloom 1986: 146). In an essay examining Bellow's debt to Dostoyevsky, Daniel Fuchs notes that "Where Dostoyevsky dramatically records the disintegration of the self, Bellow tentatively assumes it" (Fuchs 1984 in Bloom 1986: 224), but Ellen Pifer detects a "deepening faith in the inmost self or 'soul' " at the heart of Bellow's work" (Pifer 1990: 3).

These contradictory conclusions reflect contradictions within Bellow's writing. Pifer clearly sees the terms "soul" and "self" as synonymous in Bellowian discourse, and

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9 Some critics sees such contradictions as typical of Bellow's vision. J.J. Clayton identifies Bellow's keynote, oxymoronically, as one of "desperate affirmation" (Clayton
indeed at times they appear to be so.\(^{10}\) At such times, Bellow is a staunch defender of the unitary, unique self, a lonely voice denying post-Freudian orthodoxy (he rejects "the psychoanalytic conception of character ... an ugly, rigid formation" [Bellow 1994: 90]). In an article in 1962 Bellow summarised the state of characterisation in contemporary fiction in bleak terms:

1965 in Bloom 1986: 80). He perceives a gulf between intention and execution, between the humanistic rhetoric and the artistic practice.

He has within him the seeds of the despair which he attacks. He is reviling that side of himself which concurs with the prophets of doom and hucksters of the void.

(Clayton 1968 in Bloom 1986: 65)

Similarly, Malcom Bradbury comments: "for a writer critical of modern apocalyptics, his own work is remarkably dominated by apocalyptic views of history" (Bradbury 1982: 23).

Bellow would not necessarily deny these contradictions or view them as weaknesses. According to him the discussion of ideas becomes art when the views most opposite to the author's own are allowed to exist in full strength ... The opposites must be free to range themselves against each other, and they must be passionately expressed on both sides.

(Bellow 1962 in Malin 1969: 220)

\(^{10}\) When Bellow speaks of the "soul" it is often in transcendent, almost quietistic terms ("The power of a work of art is such that it ... leads to contemplative states, to wonderful and, to my mind, sacred states of the soul" [Bellow 1994: 84]) when "self" (with its psychoanalytical/sociological associations) might seem incongruous, or bathetic. However, Bellow has written of the existence of a "first soul ... a core of the self" (Bellow 1994: 322), complained that "technology takes little interest in selfhood, in our souls" (Bellow 1987d in Goldman et al 1992: 194) and, commenting on a passage in the journal of George Seferis, observed enigmatically: "By the light of one's judgment ... one sees the naked soul. When oneself has come out, many things are possible" (Bellow 1994: 137). Bellow sometimes capitalises the "s" in self, although whether his practice is governed by the context in which he is using it, by an intended semantic distinction (like that between "Tragedy" and "tragedy"), or simply by whim, is not clear. To avoid confusion, I will stick to the lower-case version in my own prose.
Instead of a unitary character with his unitary personality, his ambitions, his passions, his soul, his fate, we find in modern literature an oddly dispersed, ragged, mingled, broken, amorphous creature whose outlines are everywhere ... and who is impossible to circumscribe in any scheme of time.

(Bellow 1962 in Malin 1969: 211)

The sentiments and language here are remarkably close to those of Christopher Lasch, writing about contemporary selfhood some twenty years later, in *The Minimal Self*:

the prevailing social conditions ... not only encourage a defensive contraction of the self but blur the boundaries between the self and its surroundings ... The minimal or narcissistic self is, above all, a self uncertain of its own outlines ...

(Lasch 1985: 19)

Just as Bellow goes on to suggest that the artist fears that the novel "may have come to an end, its conception of self exhausted and with this conception our interest in the fate of that self so conceived" (Bellow 1962 in Malin 1969: 213), so Lasch argues that "The decline of the narrative mode ... reflects the fragmentation of the self" (Lasch 1985: 96). Bellow reiterated his views in two different articles in the following year, suggesting that "It is the self, the person to whom things happen, who is perhaps not acceptable to the difficult and fastidious modern consciousness" (Bellow 1963a: 61), lamenting that "American novels are filled with complaints over the misfortunes of the sovereign Self" and pitying the plight of "the embattled Self" who "feels the pressure of a vast public life, which may dwarf him as an individual" (Bellow 1963b: 26, 23) - again anticipating Lasch, who notes "the siege mentality" which harrows the "beleagured" self (Lasch 1985: 18, 16). Elsewhere, Bellow admonishes us to resist the tendency to replace "the single individual, the unit of vital being" with the "fictive superself" promoted by modern industry. "Glamorous, victorious technology is sometimes considered to have discredited all former ideas of the single self", but, Bellow implies, we should not be fooled (Bellow 1975c: 9).
At other times, however, he seems to share Herzog's ambition of "overturning the last of the Romantic errors about the uniqueness of the Self" (Bellow 1965a: 39), to put forward, as Jonathan Wilson sees it:

a vision of the self as endlessly theatrical, a vision which thus seems to contradict the endorsement of wholeness and selfhood that ... [he] otherwise seems to offer. (Wilson 1992 in Goldman et al 1992: 125)

For Wilson, Bellow's novels exhibit what Lasch calls "the equation of selfhood with the ability to play a variety of roles and to assume an endless variety of freely chosen identities" (Lasch 1985: 52). Yet, like Lasch, Bellow is dismayed by such an equation, and by its implied atomisation of the individual. Bellow's distrust of such conceptions of selfhood leads him to characterise the modern self as an ersatz soul - a "modern substitute for the soul", as Allan Bloom puts it (Bloom 1987: 173). Or, to use Lasch's terminology again, "minimal": a thin veil, a cosmetic device, a front that individuals assume in order to facilitate their social interactions.

most men in their self-presentation\(^{11}\) to the world settle upon a few simple attributes and create a surface easy to characterise and to understand. Underneath their real, complex existence takes place.

(Bellow 1954: 101)

Or as a convenient simplification, a delusion of integration exposed by art:

It [the novel] tells us that for every human being there is a diversity of existences, that the single existence is itself an illusion in part ...

(Bellow 1994: 97)

\(^{11}\) Bellow's remarks appear to anticipate Erving Goffman's seminal study of the construction of social identity, published two years later, entitled *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, as well as Philip Roth's lament that "Everyone is invited to imitate the grossest simplifications of self that are mercilessly projected upon them by the mass media and advertising" (Roth 1985b: 101).
Or a socially expedient invention, symptomatic of shallow modern bureaucracy:

the ideal modern self seems to me to be a fabrication ... made up in order to satisfy certain requirements of personal advancement and safety.

(Bellow 1987b: 20)

The problem, of course, is that, as Charlie Citrine puts it, "to be fully conscious of oneself as an individual is also to be separated from all else" (Bellow 1975a: 203). Bellow's characters strive for self-sufficiency - for a unified sovereign self - but also yearn for the dissolution of that self, so that they can partake of the "psychic unity of mankind". If all of this is somewhat confused and confusing, this is no reason to condemn Bellow. He is, after all, a novelist, not a philosopher; we should not expect to be able to deduce a coherent ideology from his writing. What is clear, however, is that for Bellow and his characters there is a persistent need to explain the self not merely in conceptual terms but in terms of the life, opinions and actions by which it is judged. From the hero of Bellow's first published short story, the unnamed "boy" who wishes to unravel "the closely curled leaves of my identity" (Bellow 1941: 233) to the narrator of his most recent story, who claims that "self-examination, once so fascinating to me, has become tedious" while clearly engaging in just such a self-examination (Bellow 1993: 194), Bellow's heroes have, like Herzog, been "overcome by the need to explain, to have it out, to justify, to put in perspective, to clarify, to make amends" (Bellow 1965a: 2).

Yet Bellow's attitude towards explanation is no less ambivalent than his attitude towards the self. He seems sometimes to regard it as inimical to art:
you feel you're being transcendent ... when you are fully expressive ... Then you're satisfied that you've done the right thing. Otherwise no. Otherwise you do fall back on explanations and definitions and boring discourse ... " (Bellow 1987b: 23).

Bellow has been accused of boring his readers with explanations and definitions, particularly in his longer novels (I agree with Peter Hyland, who suggests that Bellow's short stories benefit from the fact that "the extended presentation of ideas in the novels ... is not possible, and there is less room for ... the lecturing that for many readers mars his work" [Hyland 1992: 127], and with Michael Glenday, for whom "The novella ... enables him [Bellow] to discover those 'enduring recognitions of reality' with fewer impediments" [Glenday 1989 in Lee 1989: 163], and many of his protagonists betray anxiety at the thought that they might be boring their interlocutors/readers.

Sammler pulls himself up in the midst of a lengthy diatribe on - what else? - self-presentation, to declare "I don't want to turn into a history book in front of your eyes" (Bellow 1970: 229). Charlie Citrine meditates (with deliberate irony?) on boredom at tedious length before breaking off to admit "These were some of the notes that Thaxter wanted me to expand. I was however in too unstable a condition" (Bellow 1975a: 203). Albert Corde, who is told by his old friend Dewey Spangler that "The obscurity of your language may have protected you somewhat - all the theorizing and poetry" (Bellow 1982: 19), looks over his recent articles and concludes:

he had interrupted his accounts ... far too often with his unwanted and misplaced high-mindedness. On rereading, he himself passed over the generalizing, philosophizing passages. They were irritating. He wouldn't, as a reader, have bothered to figure them out. Straight narrative was a relief and a consolation.

(Bellow 1982: 160)

Kenneth Trachtenberg is forever apologising for his prolixity: "But never mind these abstruse considerations"; "I apologise for these asides"; "Excuse the language"; "Excuse the jargon"; "This can't be very clear as yet"; "I am here not to lecture you on history but to relate the strange turns in the life of my uncle Benn" (Bellow 1987a: 271, 294, 27, 29, 37, 210). Like his uncle, who "was forever proposing to hold heavyweight conversations" and whose "high-level seriousness could be harrowing", with Kenneth it's likely to be "one moment of flashing insight and then a quarter of an hour of pedantry and tiresome elaboration" (Bellow 1987a: 11, 13, 190-1).

On the other hand, Bellow implicitly defends his right to be boring, claiming, paradoxically, that to place a high premium on interesting phenomena is to be boring: "it's a cancer of American life that people believe they must be interesting ... it comes out of a sense of dullness, boredom and inadequacy" (Bellow 1975b: 10). These sentiments are echoed by Citrine ("What a tremendous force the desire to be interesting has in the democratic U.S.A." [Bellow 1975a: 170]), by Sammler ("An interesting life is the supreme concept of dullards" [Bellow 1970: 229]) and by Marcella Vankuchen in "The Wen", who tells old flame Solomon Ithimar, a "celebrated scientist", that her husband's efforts to be interesting are "typically American ... He acts cheerful but feels gloomy ... It's an ordinary life. Boring" (Bellow 1965: 72, 73).
Yet at other times he identifies it as the task of the writer, a burden that distinguishes him from other men:

I agreed in principle with Whitman about the evils of solitary self-absorption. Nevertheless I am bound to point out that the market man, the furniture remover, the steamfitter, the tool-and-die maker, had easier lives. They were spared the labor of explaining themselves.

(Bellow 1994: 126)

When Herzog asks, in exasperation, "Was it a point of honour to explain myself to everyone?" the reader may be tempted to shout back "Yes!", for the whole novel is, among other things, an extended exercise in self-explanation. Bellow is constantly complaining that intellectuals, in their rationalism, deny the numinous, the transcendent - the "powers of soul" that artists affirm - and believe, falsely, that they can explain everything (Bellow 1994: 113). Herzog, too, is suspicious of ratiocination as a cure for the ailments of the soul.

Moses hated the humiliating comedy of heartache. But can thought wake you from the dream of existence? Not if it becomes a second realm of confusion, another more complicated dream, the dream of the intellect, the delusion of total explanations.13

(Bellow 1965a: 166)

This delusion is one that torments and enchants Bellow's protagonists, like the mirage of an oasis, shimmering before a parched desert traveller. Explanations offer

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13 Bellow may be thinking here of Wittgenstein's criticisms of Freud's analysis of dreams:

The attraction of certain kinds of explanation is overwhelming. At a given moment the attraction of a certain kind of explanation is greater than you can conceive. In particular, explanation of the kind "This is really only this".

(Wittgenstein 1966: 24)
the prospect of clarification, but tend to become part of the obfuscation that they seek to penetrate - a "second realm of confusion." In particular, the desire to explain the self is compulsive and yet, paradoxically, the self tends, like a dream, to disintegrate under the glare of analysis. To anatomise the self is to vivisect it; to interpret the "dream of existence" is to narcoticise the soul.

This theme is taken up again in Mr. Sammler's Planet:

"Intellectual man had become an explaining creature ... The soul wanted what it wanted ... It sat unhappily on superstructures of explanation, poor bird, not knowing which way to fly."

(Bellow 1970: 3)

This is the crux of Bellow's repeated attacks on intellectuals, expressed more recently, and somewhat more prosaically, in an article in 1993 in which he wrote that "Intellectuals seem to me to have turned away from those elements in life unaccounted for in modern science ... The powers of soul ... are held to be subjective" (Bellow 1994: 113). Again Bellow anticipates Lasch, who derides the "jargon" of "the ready-made explanatory systems of an age never at a loss for explanations" (Lasch 1985: 139). While Lasch writes euphemistically of the "older conception of personality, rooted in Judaeo-Christian traditions" as an antidote to such explanatory-systems, with their "behavioral or therapeutic conception" of the self, however, Bellow gives this "older conception of personality" its name: the soul (Lasch 1985: 59).

Bellow's image of the soul as a pathetic, bewildered, vulnerable, but living thing, perched precariously on the monolithic, inanimate constructions of the intellect, symbolises Sammler's dilemma, and - according to the work of conservative intellectuals such as Lasch and Allan Bloom - the dilemma of modern man. He values the soul above all else, but his is too undernourished to take flight and must rely on his intellect (which, however, is inimical to it) for support. Like Herzog, Sammler is a compulsive explainer, a "prisoner of perception, a compulsory witness" (Bellow 1965a: 78). Unlike Herzog, Sammler's imprisonment was literal. What he has witnessed is a
horror even more profound than Kurtz's: that of the Nazi death camps. Having experienced the inexplicable and seen what an enlightened civilisation is capable of, Sammler is "extremely skeptical of explanations, rationalistic practices" (Bellow 1970: 226), yet he continually explains his skepticism of explanations ("I have an objection to extended explanations ... [they make] the mental life of mankind ungovernable") and the narrator of the novel has to admit that "he [Sammler] too had a touch of the same disease - the disease of the single self explaining what was what and who was who" (Bellow 1970: 280).

As Gertrude Stein has pointed out, the act of composition is intrinsically self-explanatory insofar as it is perpetually racing to catch up with itself - striving to integrate itself in its own narrative process: "Beginning again and again and again explaining composition and time is a natural thing" (Stein 1972: 516). As Sterne suggests in *Tristram Shandy*, this is a race which it is destined to lose, but from which it cannot refrain. The anxieties of Bellow's self-explanations, however, seem a long way from the playfulness of Stein or Sterne (Bellow's claim that "my own sense of fun is closer to 1776 than 1976" notwithstanding [Bellow 1976: 56]). In fact, the writer whom he most resembles in this respect is Philip Roth.

**Philip Roth**

In an essay in *Reading Myself and Others* (which is dedicated "To Saul Bellow, the "other" I have read from the beginning with the deepest pleasure and admiration"), Roth speaks of himself neologistically as a "redface" - a hybrid of the two characteristic categories of American writer that Philip Rahv defined in his famous essay "Paleface and Redskin". Whereas Rahv, writing in the late thirties, had

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14 Roth's admiration does not prevent him from identifying in Bellow's work an opposition between "ethical Jewhood" and "sexual niggerhood" (Bellow's phrase) which reinforces the stereotypical dichotomy of the dignified, suffering, Jew-victim and
diagnosed American literature as schizophrenic15 ("The national literature suffers from the ills of a split personality"), caught between the "fatal Antipodes" represented by the refined paleface sensibilities of Henry James on the one hand and the enthusiastic sensuality of Walt Whitman on the other, Roth suggests that the post-war years have witnessed an uneasy reconciliation of these warring factions, "a feeling of being fundamentally ill at ease in, and at odds with, both worlds" (Roth 1985b: 83). The "redface"

reenacts the argument [between paleface and redskin] within the body of his own work ... bad conscience is the medium in which his literary sensibility moves. Thus the continuing need for self-analysis and self-justification.

(Roth 1985b: 84)

In another essay, Roth credits Bellow with "closing the gap ... between redskin and paleface" and indeed Roth may well have acquired the taste for self-explanation from his literary hero (Roth 1985b: 285). However, if Bellow has on the one hand advocated critical self-analysis as an index of the novelist's worth ("The degree to which you challenge your own beliefs and expose them to destruction is a test of your worth as a novelist") and on the other defended the novelist's right to defend himself the dissolute, bullying Gentile-aggressor, and which is redeemed only by the "deliberately ambiguous ... self-challenging ... densely rendered and reflective" texture of the novels (Roth 1985b: 285). Others have commented on the "self-challenging" nature of Bellow's work (Malcom Bradbury praises "the repeated rhythm of self-questioning that undercuts his own concepts and the process of conceptualization itself" in Bellow's novels [Bradbury 1982: 102] ), but the fact that Roth singles this out as one of Bellow's greatest virtues, just as he singles out the "self-addiction" of many of Kafka's protagonists, seems to me to say as much about Roth's own aesthetic as it does about Bellow's or Kafka's (Roth 1985b: 313).

15 A diagnosis echoed by Bellow in his essay "The Writer as Moralist", in which he laments the historical polarisation of American letters, between rival camps whom he names the "Cleans and Dirties": "The Cleans want to celebrate the bourgeois virtues ... The Dirties celebrate impulsiveness, lawless tendencies ... (Bellow 1963a: 59).
("I am a performer and speak as a performer. But for almost two centuries, performers have also felt it necessary to vindicate themselves while performing"), Roth has made a career out of this dialectic (Bellow 1994: 46, 164).

Roth is at once the most sincere and the most disingenuous of writers, a paradox compounded by the fact that he is invariably disingenuous about his sincerity and sincere about his disingenuousness. Acutely self-conscious, his writing has increasingly taken its own self-consciousness as its subject. Both defensive and self-incriminating, intensely subjective and rigorously objective about its own subjectivity, self-obsessed and self-detached, Roth's work has exploited polarities and has tended to elicit polarised critical responses.

Introducing a collection of essays on Roth in 1982, Sanford Pinsker observed that

Neutral criticism ... hardly exists where Roth is concerned. His readers have strong attachments to one end or the other of the evaluative yardstick; they either love his work or hate it.

(Pinsker 1982: 2-3)

Six years later the editors of Reading Philip Roth lamented the lack of sophistication in Roth criticism, noting that all too often "critical responses ... are permeated by a constant confusion of tale and teller" (Milbauer & Watson 1988: ix). Certainly much of the criticism on Roth (particularly in the earlier years of his career) is profoundly polemical, centering on the moral values (or lack of them) that his supporters and detractors claim to find (or find lacking) in his work. Whereas many critics of Bellow profess genuine confusion over the extent to which his narrators speak for him, critics of Roth seem simply to assume that the narrative voice is Roth's, and many have been outraged by what they take to be the author's views.

Jeremy Larner writes that "Roth seeks only to cheapen the people he writes about" and accuses him of being "a liar" (Larner 1960 in Pinsker 1982: 28); John Gross finds in Roth's work "the ugliness of bad art" and "an intolerable knowingness about
lubricants and deoderants, menstruation and masturbation" (Gross 1962 in Pinkser 1982: 41); Robert Alter charges him with harbouring "a vendetta against human nature" (Alter 1967 in Pinsker 1982: 45); J. W. Bertens writes of "an unnecessary focus on the crude" in Roth's work (Bertens 1980 in Bakker & Wilkinson 1980: 99); George J. Searles objects to the "explicit detail and uninhibited language" of Portnoy's Complaint (Searles 1985: 11); Joseph L. Cohen denounces The Anatomy Lesson as "merely a spewing forth of venom" (Cohen 1989: 197); and Irving Howe finds Roth guilty of a "failure in literary tact", of "free-floating contempt and animus", of "vulgarity", of displaying a "need to rub our noses in the muck of squalid daily existence", a "swelling nausea before the ordinariness of human existence" and "horror before the sewage of the quotidian" (Howe 1972 in Pinkser 1982: 234, 237, 243, 238).

Recent criticism has tended to be more temperate, but reviews of Roth's last novel in The Independent On Sunday (in which Jonathan Raban accused him of being "in the grip of a mania for secrecy and occlusion" [Raban 1993: 27] ) and in The Guardian (in which Philip Hensher denounced Operation Shylock as "a dishonest and wicked book" that "needs its morality looking at" and accused Roth of "an immoral misuse of fiction" and of exhibiting "bad manners" [Hensher 1993: 11] ) proved that he is still liable to provoke the sort of journalistic vilification more usually reserved for politicians.16

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16 That most of the critics cited above are Jewish is of course no coincidence. Many of the severest attacks on Roth have clearly been politically-motivated and designed to discredit his status as an artist in order to discredit his portraits of Jews (which were felt by the more conservative elements of the American-Jewish community to be at best misguided and at worst inflammatory). As Mark Schechner puts it

their [the Jewish critics'] quarrel with him is not properly over literature or any aspects thereof, but over culture, and institutional Jewry in America these days has a decidedly rigid, defensive notion of culture.

(Schechner 1974 in Pinsker 1982: 118)

Three years after Schechner wrote this, his case was put even more effectively by the comments of Peter Shaw in the conservative American-Jewish journal, Commentary.
In addition to this shrill chorus of moral condemnation, Roth has, like Bellow, been accused of misogyny, and of being either unwilling to, or incapable of, representing autonomous, fully-realised women. In 1971, in an essay entitled "Portnoy's Mother's Complaint, or Depression in Middle-Aged Women", Pauline Bart suggested that the portrait of Sophie Portnoy was characteristic of the stereotypical cultural postioning of women in literature and society, and more recently Irving Weinman singled out Portnoy's Complaint as exemplary of a certain type of male-authored novel in which "the ostensible object of irony is the male character while the real object of its sexual irony is the female" (Weinman 1984 in Wandor 1984: 134).

Sanford Pinsker writes, of Maureen in My Life as a Man, that she "gets the sort of lumps one expects from a misogynist like Roth" (Pinkser 1975: 120), George J. Searles observes that "women ... are seldom presented as fully-rounded characters in their own right" (Searles 1985: 59) and Sarah Blacher Cohen makes out a more detailed case that arrives at much the same conclusion in her essay on "Philip Roth's Would-Be Patriarchs and their Shikses and Shrews" (Cohen 1975 in Pinsker 1982: 209-16).

Hermione Lee offers a rather more balanced view, acknowledging that women in Roth tend to stand "as Dionysian or daemonic influences opposed to the Appollonian reason and wisdom of the male[s]" but pointing out that Roth's men "are vulnerable, envious and afraid of women, not domineering chauvinists" (Lee 1982: 77, 78), while Sam

if he [Roth] has not been bad for the Jews, he has decidedly been bad to them ... for the Jews he has been a friend of the proverbial sort that makes enemies unnecessary.

(Shaw 1977: 79)

For a fuller discussion of Roth's relationship with his Jewish critics, see Chapter Two.

17 Indeed the two are casually tarred with the same brush in Harold Bloom's review of Operation Shylock, where he makes the following throwaway remark: "As with Saul Bellow's female characters, Roth's tend not to be very convincing" (Bloom 1993: 47).
Girgus goes further, arguing that in *When She Was Good* Roth adopts a "feminist position" (Girgus 1989: 153).18

As with Bellow, critical discourse on Roth is punctuated by frequent (and frequently contradictory) references to the importance of the self in his work. John McDaniel identifies Roth's protagonists with the "activist hero" whose "central concern is with self-definition" (McDaniel 1974: 44); Jones and Nance note that "all the protagonists [in Roth] ... stake a claim for the individualized self" and that they are "characteristically modern in the sense that their battleground is the self and their struggles are with the forces that shape, or attempt to impose limitations upon, that identity" (Jones & Nance 1981: 12, 37); Donald Kartiganer draws attention to "the attraction in his fiction to the most exaggerated divisions of self" and to the frequency with which his heroes undergo "a bizarre metamorphosis in which a new self emerges to stand in striking opposition to the old" (Kartiganer 1988 in Milbauer & Watson 1988: 183, 182); Patrick O'Donnell writes of Peter Tarnopol's desire "to locate some authorised version of the self" (O'Donnell 1988 in Milbauer & Watson 1988: 152); Jonathan Brent argues that Zuckerman is "a character with no centre at all ... his self is a product of both psychological and ethical relationships and the evolution of a

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18 The heroine of Roth's second novel, Lucy Nelson, is usually adduced as evidence of Roth's misogyny, but this seems to me a fundamental misunderstanding of the novel. While Lucy is exasperating in her self-righteousness, she is also clearly the most sympathetic and intelligent character in the novel and Roth's treatment of her tragedy has affinities not only with *Madame Bovary* (a debt that Roth explicitly acknowledges), but also with novels like *The Mill on the Floss, Tess, Anna Karenina* and *Sister Carrie* in the way that it represents an intelligent, strong-willed woman destroyed by the narrow provincialism of a patriarchal society. This point seems to have been lost even (or especially?) on the enthusiastic reviewers of the novel, from whom one paperback American edition (Roth 1968) quotes the following extracts: "She's a little ball-breaker of a bitch ... a fiendish figure of revenge and redemption!" *(The Kirkus Review).*

"Her all-consuming mission in life - the wholesale destruction of all men ... A beautifully realised portrait." *(Newsweek).*

"... Easily the most venomous heroine that literature has seen in some time. The reader just aches for someone to give Lucy a bust in the chops." *(Cleveland Press).*
particular literary tradition" (Brent 1988 in Milbauer & Watson 1988: 184-5); Adam Phillips observes that in Roth "The freedom to proliferate selves is subsidised by lives that have been severely circumscribed" (Phillips 1991: 17), and Debra Shostak argues that in The Counterlife Roth "deconstruct[s] the unitary self by multiplying stories about the self" while at the same time "textualising the self ... recover[ing] metafiction from the implicit nihilism of the postmodern decentered or indeterminate self" (Shostak 1991: 197, 198-9).

Is Roth a post-modernist revelling in the disintegration of the self, or a traditionalist seeking its reintegration? Of his narrative procedure in The Counterlife (whose self-cancelling, self-cannibalising structure seems in some ways characteristically postmodern), Roth has commented:

There is nothing "modernist", "postmodernist" or the least bit avant-garde about the technique. We are all writing fictitious versions of our lives all the time, contradictory but mutually entangling stories that, however subtly or grossly falsified, constitute our hold on reality and are the closest thing we have to the truth.\(^{19}\)

(Roth 1988b in Milbauer & Watson 1988: 11-12)

However, Roth's sense that reality and truth are narrative constructs, tenuous at best and possibly entirely illusory, is characteristically, if not exclusively, post-modern, as is his conceit that his highly self-conscious, highly literary rhetorical playfulness is somehow representative of what "we" all do "all the time". Like Bellow, Roth uses a considerable amount of autobiographical material in his novels; like Bellow, he favours first-person, confessional narratives ("it's the 'I' who can be most intimate, who speaks

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\(^{19}\) There may be an allusion here to Ortega Y Gasset's claim that "Man is the novelist of himself" (quoted in Newman 1984: 52).
A variation on this view is also voiced by Nathan Zuckerman within the novel:

The treacherous imagination is everybody's maker - we are all the invention of somebody else, everybody a conjuration conjuring up everyone else. We are all each other's authors.

(Roth 1987: 149)
in confidence, who tells us secrets", he told Sara Davidson), but whereas Bellow effaces the explicit traces of his authorship, Roth (particularly from My Life as a Man onwards) highlights his (Roth 1977b: 52).

Early on in his career Roth was dismayed by the popular identification of Portnoy with himself, denouncing as absurd that "a novel in the guise of a confession was received and judged ... as a confession in the guise of a novel" (Roth 1985b: 274). Later he treated the theme in his fiction (Nathan Zuckerman is repeatedly taken for his fictional Portnoy-like protagonist, Carnovksy, in the Zuckerman Bound novels) and deliberately blurred the line between fiction and autobiography by writing an autobiography in which Zuckerman appears (The Facts) and publishing a book that presents itself as a confession in the guise of a novel (Operation Shylock). Roth's later work, like Nathan Zuckerman's, is "an ever-recurring story that's at once [his] invention and the invention of [him]" (Roth 1985a: 88) - an increasingly tangled skein of autobiographical fictions and fictional autobiographies; of "self-protective writing postures" and "merciless self-evisceration" (Roth 1988a: 65, 185).

In My Life as a Man Roth offers us three different versions of the life of a writer called Peter Tarnopol: two "useful fictions" (or "fictional self-legends", to use a phrase from The Facts [Roth 1988a: 18] ) featuring a Tarnopol-surrogate called Nathan Zuckerman, and an "autobiographical narrative" in which Tarnopol speaks in his own

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20 In Deception the male protagonist (identified only as "Philip") observes that 

"By the time a novelist worth his salt is thirty-six, he's no longer translating experience into a fable - he's imposing his fable onto experience." 

(Roth 1990: 121)

I believe that My Life as a Man (begun when Roth was in his mid-thirties, though not published until he was forty-three) describes this transition in Roth's work.

21 In Deception, Philip complains that "I write fiction and I'm told it's autobiography, I write autobiography and I'm told it's fiction" (Roth 1990: 184).
voice. Tarnopol interrupts the second of these fictions, "Courting Disaster (or, Serious
in the Fifties)", to tell of us of his vain struggle "to stifle the sense I have that I am
living someone else's life" and to convince himself that "I am not a character in a
book ... I am real" (Roth 1974: 84, 86).22 In the third section, "My True Story", this
self-alienation goes a stage further, as the narrator (supposedly Tarnopol himself)
concedes that

Tarnopol, as he is called, is beginning to seem as imaginary as my Zuckermans
anyway, or at least as detached from the memoirist - his revelations coming to
seem like still another "useful fiction," and not because I am telling lies. I am
trying to keep to the facts.

(Roth 1974: 231)

However, as Zuckerman points out in his letter to Roth at the end of The Facts:
"The truth is that facts are much more refractory and unmanageable and inconclusive
than fiction" (Roth 1988a: 166). At one point in the novel, Tarnopol's editor asks him
whether he is "planning to write Zuckerman variations until you have constructed a
kind of full-length fictional fugue?" (Roth 1974: 113) - which is precisely what Roth
himself goes on to do in the sequence of works beginning with The Ghost Writer and
ending with The Counterlife (with the letter at the end of The Facts as a coda).
Tarnopol tells us that he "could no longer have a conversation with my father that did
not seem to me to be a reading from my fiction" (Roth 1974: 271), while in Patrimony
(whose subtitle, "A True Story", echoes the title of Tarnopol's autobiographical
narrative, "My True Story") Roth's father's battles with constipation eerily echo those
of Jack Portnoy.23 Like all his successors (for whom he is a sort of template),
Tarnopol believes that

22 David Kepesh in The Professor of Desire likewise reminds himself that he is "real ...
nobody is making me up, other than myself" (Roth 1978: 188).

23 In Portnoy's Complaint, Alex's father has "a weary and afflicted expression on his
face" each time he emerges from another unsuccessful battle with his bowels, drinks
his self is to many a novelist what his own physiognomy is to a painter of portraits: the closest subject at hand demanding scrutiny, a problem for his art to solve - given the enormous obstacles to truthfulness, the artistic problem.

(Roth 1974: 240)

What interests Roth is what interests Zuckerman's would-be biographer in *Deception*:

the terrible ambiguity of the "I", the way a writer makes a myth of himself and, particularly, why. What started it? Where do they come from, all these improvisations on a self?

(Roth 1990: 94)

Or, as Nathan Zuckerman puts it in *The Anatomy Lesson*, "Subjectivity's the subject" (Roth 1984: 196). Roth's deliberate foregrounding of the relationship between narrative voice and authorial position might recall Thoreau's remarks in *Walden*:

copious quantities of prune juice, and complains repeatedly that "I haven't moved my bowels in a week", while the young Alex "wait[s] with him ... [for] "the miracle [that] never came" (Roth 1986: 8, 24). Compare the following passage from *Patrimony*:

He'd had a glass of prune juice before retiring and another at breakfast, but when I called in to him some twenty minutes later to ask if he was all right, he replied glumly ... "No luck."
"It'll happen," I called back.
"Four days," he said, mournfully ...
He didn't emerge for another half hour ... looking ... thoroughly defeated ...

(Roth 1991: 169)

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24 There is a distinctively post-modernist, metafictional moment towards the end of this novel when Nathan writes in his notebook the line "WHEN HE IS SICK EVERY MAN NEEDS A MOTHER", which echoes the opening line of the novel: "When he is sick, every man wants his mother" (Roth 1984: 270, 3).
In most books, the I, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism, is the main difference. We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking.

(Thoreau 1957: 259)

Yet, on the other hand, there are Barthes's famous animadversions on biographical criticism:

The explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author "confiding" in us.

(Barthes 1968 in Lodge 1988: 168)

Roth's later work moves between these two poles - on the one hand endorsing Thoreau's recommendation that the author dispense with rhetorical disguises and speak in his own voice, and on the other sharing Barthes's post-modern scepticism (expressed typographically through the use of italics) about the meaning of terms such as explanation and author (in the post-Saussurean world of multivalent signification, there is no single explanation or author of a work, only different readings).

In 1981 Roth claimed that "The uneventfulness of my autobiography would make Beckett's The Unnameable read like Dickens" and that "I am nothing like so sharply delineated as a character in a book" (Roth 1985b: 117, 128); in The Anatomy Lesson Nathan Zuckerman is told by a fellow-writer, Ivan Felt, that "your books give off a greater sense of reality than you do" (Roth 1984: 82) and in The Facts Nathan Zuckerman tells his creator that "you've written metamorphoses of yourself so many times, you no longer have any idea what you are or ever were" (Roth 1988a: 162). At the beginning of The Professor of Desire David Kepesh resolves to "stop impersonating others and Become Myself, or at least begin to impersonate the self I believe I ought now to be" (Roth 1978: 12); in The Counterlife Nathan Zuckerman refuses "to perpetuate upon myself the joke of a self", arguing that "If there is ... an irreducible self, it is rather small, I think, and may even be the root of all
impersonation" and that "in the absence of a self, one impersonates selves, and after a while impersonates best the self that best gets one through" (Roth 1987: 324-5).

Like Bellow, who feels "on loan to himself", Roth and his writer-protagonists seem to feel to feel that they are mediums through which the lives of others are lived: as the Zuckerman of *The Counterlife* puts it, "I am a theater and nothing more than a theater" (Roth 1987: 85). Whereas for Zuckerman this recognition of the lack of an essential self is liberating (it enables him "to give up the artificial fiction of being myself, for the genuine, satisfying falseness of being somebody else" [Roth 1987: 73]), for the Roth of *The Facts*, who hopes "to transform myself into myself", it is distressing: "If this manuscript conveys anything, it's my exhaustion with masks, disguises, distortions and lies" (Roth 1988a: 5, 6). Yet there is no escaping from disguises; as Zuckerman tells Roth in this book, autobiography is "probably the most manipulative of all literary forms" (Roth 1988a: 172). The Roth of *The Facts* is as much an impersonation of himself as Zuckerman, not just because of the intrinsically manipulative nature of autobiography, but because, as the book's subtitle reminds us, this is "A Novelist's Autobiography" (Roth 1988a: 172). Roth is always, first and foremost, a novelist; always on the job, always intent, as Maria Zuckerman remarks in *The Facts*, on "making everything signify something", whether in his fiction or in his life (Roth 1988a: 190). In *Patrimony*, Roth describes how, on his way to see his ailing father, he takes the wrong turning, finds himself in the cemetery where his mother is buried and decides to visit her grave before resuming his journey. Recalling the incident the next day, he realises that he was "glad that I had wound up there", although "it hadn't been a comfort or consolation" (Roth 1991: 74).

I wondered if my satisfaction didn't come down to the fact that the cemetery was narratively right: paradoxically, it had the feel of an event not entirely random and unpredictable and, in that way at least, offered a strange sort of relief from the impact of all that was frighteningly unforeseen.

(Roth 1991: 74)
If for Roth, the novelist's imagination continues to shape, to impose meaning, to find significance, in real life as in fiction, for Joseph Heller "dealing with factual matter [renders] my imagination ... inert" (Heller 1986b in Ruas 1986: 151).

Heller once remarked that

I could work with a good deal of Philip Roth's subject matter and probably do it in much the same spirit, but his interest in the aesthetic and literary problems of writing - my mind wouldn't tell me anything about that.

(Heller 1986b in Ruas 1986: 167)

Whereas Bellow and Roth debate aesthetic theories, both within their fiction and without, and are prolific participants in the literary-critical circus, both as subjects and as commentators, Heller offers rather less meat for the critic to chew on. He rarely ventures into critical discourse or journalism, conceding "I'm no good at nonfiction writing. The few times I tried it, a couple of book reviews, articles, I realized that I'm less than mediocre" (Heller 1986b in Ruas 1986: 151).

Heller's mediocrity as a non-fiction writer (a judgment borne out by the one work of non-fiction he has published, No Laughing Matter) is partly due to the fact that, as he puts it, "I don't have a literary vocabulary" (Heller 1986b in Ruas 1986: 150). There is more to it than that, however. Heller's attitude to his own writing and to the writing of others - his literary sensibility - is far removed from Bellow's and Roth's. Bellow and Roth are academic writers and intellectuals in a way that Heller is not. For Bellow and Roth writing seems to be a vocation and a compulsion, for Heller it is a career. Whereas interviews with Bellow and Roth are likely to concern

25 Heller has held posts at a number of universities, but he has never been engaged with literary criticism or contemporary intellectual debates in the way that both Roth and Bellow have been.
themselves with questions of aesthetics, Heller is more at home discussing the sales figures of *Catch-22* than the state of the modern novel. This candid materialism is embarrassing for the literary critic. Here is Stephen Potts, speculating on the reasons for the differing intervals between Heller's first three novels:

The relative proximity of these two works, *[Something Happened* and *Good As Gold]* contrasted with the twelve-year span that separated *Something Happened* from *Catch-22*, may be due to a factor not usually considered in connection with serious art, but mentioned publicly by Heller on more than one occasion. He has tied the length of time it took him to finish *Something Happened* to his income from *Catch-22*; in short, as long as his first novel was earning substantial sums, he did not need to publish a second. Since *Something Happened* did not do anywhere near as well with the buying public, Heller may have been motivated to turn out his third novel somewhat more quickly.

(Potts 1972: 47)

Because of the (fairly rigid) division in the way books are marketed, published and reviewed, between what Potts calls "serious art", and popular fiction, for a writer to be popular tends to incur the risk of being labelled populist. Roth and Bellow have also had best-selling novels that made them into household names (*Portnoy's Complaint* and *Herzog* respectively), but in their cases their reputations as serious novelists had already been established. With Heller, however, because it was his first novel, the immense success (critical and commercial) of *Catch-22* created expectations that have inevitably been disappointed, and his subsequent novels have met with increasing indifference or disillusionment amongst critics and public alike. In this respect, Heller has been a victim not only of his own early sensational success, but also of his own eclecticism: because his novels are so diverse in theme and subject matter it

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26 Although this division is a relatively recent phenomenon (a legacy of Modernism), it is now so entrenched that there are only a handful of contemporary novelists who can be said to have a foot in both camps (among British writers only Martin Amis, Julian Barnes, Salman Rushdie and Jeannette Winterson spring to mind; among Americans Kurt Vonnegut, Norman Mailer, J.D. Salinger and E.L. Doctorow have all had best-sellers that have also achieved critical acclaim).
is difficult for the critic to approach them as a body of work, and unlikely that a broad
loyal readership will be established (both critics and ordinary readers like to know what
to expect from their authors; when asked which contemporaries he admires, Heller
commonly answers that he likes to be surprised by fiction).

Of the criticism that has been written on Heller, there is one objection that will
by now be tediously familiar: "we are not always sure how the author regards his
characters" (Potts 1972: 63). The other critical commonplace where Heller is
concerned is that, as Robert Merrill puts it, "almost everything Heller writes is also
marred by excessive length" (Merrill 1987: 121). *Something Happened*, in particular,
comes in for a good deal of criticism on this score: Stephen Potts judges it "too
ponderous ... to survive for long" (Potts 1972: 63), J. Epstein complains that "Slocum
rambles on ... repetitiously" (Epstein 1974 in Nagel 1984: 99) and Robert Merrill calls
it an "interminable monologue", suggesting that "At something like four hundred
pages ... [it] would have been a much better book" (Merrill 1987: 77, 95). Indeed,
during his discussion of the novel he repeatedly harps on this theme, complaining that
"we are inundated with his [Slocum's] annoying, even maddening trivialities", and that
Heller "depicts Bob Slocum at great length", and describing the novel twice as "almost
six hundred pages long", twice more as "more than five hundred pages", as a "very
long novel", and as "extremely difficult reading" (Merrill 1987: 94, 87, 84, 124, 91, 94,
87, 94). Yet he finishes by saying that the novel "is the most convincing study we have
of what it is like to participate in the struggle that is post-war America" (Merrill
1987: 97). While some of Heller's work would have benefited from some judicious
editing, to criticise a novel as carefully paced and as cumulatively resonant as
*Something Happened* for being too long is, it seems to me, rather like the Archduke
Ferdinand in the film of Peter Schaffer's *Amadeus* criticising one of Mozart's works for
having too many notes. On the subject of the self neither Heller nor his critics have
much to say, although I shall be arguing that three of Heller's novels are intimately
concerned with self-explanation in its various forms. Overall, the current state of Heller criticism is greatly impoverished and there is a pressing need for a comprehensive re-evaluation of his work.

Two remarks made by Irving Malin, surveying the state of Bellow criticism almost thirty years ago still apply, albeit to a lesser degree, not only to criticism on Bellow, but also to that on Roth and Heller: "Rarely do they [Bellow's critics] explore psychological motivation"; "few critics have bothered with textual analysis" (Malin 1969: viii-ix, x). In addition to the aims outlined at the beginning of this introduction, I try to address these neglected areas in my readings of their work and, through these readings, to give some sense of their importance as writers, both relatively (although there is little direct comparison between them, implicit comparisons emerge in the way suggested by Bellow's remark that a modern novelist's "own books are also a comment on his contemporaries and reveal that he supports certain tendencies and rejects others"), and in terms of their larger literary-historical significance (Bellow 1963b: 22).

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27 Heller does note, of *Something Happened*, that "The first and third person are fused in a way I've never seen before" (Heller 1975b in Golson 1981: 413). If he were to read *Herzog*, or the *Zuckerman Bound* tetralogy, however, he would find something very similar going on.
CHAPTER 1

EXPLAINING COMEDIANS: SUPERIORITY, RELIEF, INCONGRUITY

Whatever you say about comedy, the opposite is also true.

(Atkinson 1992)

One uses humour to make people laugh ... The trouble is, it makes them think you aren't being serious. That is the risk you take.

(Larkin 1983: 73)

The true comedian does not love a joke, he lives it; he himself is his own best joke.

(Galligan 1984: 52-3)

The Search For A Poetics Of Comedy

Attempting to define the notoriously nebulous term comedy has proved an irresistible but elusive challenge for philosophers, psychologists, cultural historians and literary critics alike, ever since Aristotle left us with his tantalising, throwaway remarks in the Poetics, which may, or may not, give us some indication of the nature of his full-length treatment of the subject. Unfortunately, this work - if it ever existed - is lost to us (except in the pages of Umberto Eco's The Name of the Rose). Despite the cursory nature of Aristotle's surviving comments on the nature of comedy, however, his claim that "comedy aims at representing men as worse than they are", "in the sense that the ridiculous is a species of ugliness or badness" effectively stigmatised comedy, relegating it to a lowly position in the classical hierarchy of literary forms (Aristotle 1987: 33, 37). The legacy of this demotion is still visible today, when comic works are frequently denied the status of more "serious" works because they are felt to lack the
dignity and refinement usually associated with high art.

Despite the odd dissenting voice - Horace Walpole's famous aphorism, "life is a tragedy to those that feel and a comedy to those that think," Bergson's contention that comedy's "appeal is to intelligence, pure and simple" (Bergson 1900 in Sypher 1980: 64), George Meredith's insistence that "true comedy ... awaken[s] thoughtful laughter" and is "significant" (Meredith 1877 in Sypher 1980: 47, 7) - the prevailing view of comedy until the present day has been that it is more lightweight intellectually, less meaningful, than other genres. Comedy has tended to be associated with light-heartedness, and light-heartedness has tended to be equated with light-headedness and triviality. Those critics who have sought to explain (and through their explanations, to elevate) comedy have usually done so in a discourse very far from comic and have consequently fallen victim to the paradox that, in the process of describing what it is that is comic about something, it ceases to be comic. As Tristram Shandy informs us, "to define - is to distrust" and, insofar as the project of comic theorists inevitably involves this distrust, it is difficult to avoid biting the hand that feeds (Sterne 1986: 225). Nevertheless, comic theories have continued to proliferate, and to offer widely varying, often directly contradictory, explanations of the nature of comedy.

Two recent studies, by Patrick O'Neill, and Lance Olsen, agree in identifying three main schools of theory that have recurred, in differing forms, through the ages: "superiority" theories, "incongruity" theories and "relief" theories (O'Neill 1990: 41; Olsen 1990: 20). Of course not all theories fit into one of these categories, and some fit into more than one, but they provide a useful starting-point in picking a way through the minefield that is the history of comic theory.

One of the earliest expressions of the idea that comedy involves the exaltation of
the self at the expense of the other is to be found in Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*:

*Sudden glory* is the passion which makes those *grimaces* called LAUGHTER, and is caused either by some sudden act of their own that pleases them or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves.

(Hobbes 1978: 57)

For Hobbes laughter is amoral, self-congratulatory and triumphalist: the manifestation of a desire to lord it over others. Hazlitt reproduces this Hobbesian analysis in his essay "On Wit and Humour" and takes it a little further, suggesting that the pleasure in laughter is heightened by the accompanying consciousness of transgressing the boundaries of acceptable behaviour.²

We laugh to shew our satisfaction with ourselves, or our contempt for those about us, or to conceal our envy or our ignorance ... As we laugh from a spontaneous impulse, we laugh the more at any restraint upon this impulse. We laugh at a thing merely because we ought not.³ [my italics]

(Hazlitt 1951: 9)

So strong is this impulse, argues Hazlitt, that we laugh even (or especially?) at the expense of those closest to us: "There is something in the misfortunes of our best friends that pleases us" (Hazlitt 1951: 9).

For Baudelaire, too, "Laughter comes from a man's idea of his own superiority", but whereas Hazlitt sees it as an anti-social impulse - bad manners - Baudelaire's view

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² There is indeed evidence that laughter was seen as vulgar - unacceptable in polite society - throughout much of the eighteenth century: Voltaire favoured "that interior smile, so much to be preferred to open laughter" and Lord Chesterfield proclaimed that "there is nothing so illiberal and ill-bred as audible laughter" (quoted in Howarth 1978: 7).

³ George Meredith expresses the opposite view in his "Essay on Comedy", arguing that "Contempt is a sentiment that cannot be entertained by comic intelligence" and that "Comedy ... is ... of necessity kept in restraint" (Meredith 1877 in Sypher 1980: 33, 45).
is that comedy is an unequal contest of wills in which "the power of laughter, is in the laugh, not at all in the object of laughter" (Baudelaire 1992: 145, 148). However, the most influential and fully-articulated version of this view of comedy is Bergson's essay "Laughter," in which he contends that comedy involves "a momentary anaesthesia of the heart", that is to say a suspension of sympathy with the object of our laughter. Furthermore, he argues, "In laughter we always find an unavowed intention to humiliate" (Bergson 1900 in Sypher 1980: 64, 148) - a notion implicit in Nell's aphorism in Beckett's *Endgame*: "Nothing is funnier than other people's unhappiness" (Beckett 1989: 20).

The laughter of farce and situation comedy is often based on this tenet, as is the more absurdist comedy of the sort often associated with writers like Beckett, Pinter and Kafka (who, according to Max Brod, used to laugh gleefully when reading aloud from *The Trial*), where inexplicable suffering is normative and attempts to seek explanations or justice are laughable. The comedy of superiority can be cruel, sadisitic, nihilistic; it can be an expression of metaphysical disgust, but it can also be a way of concealing self-disgust and despair, and it is in this form, as I shall argue later, that we find it in Saul Bellow.

Advocates of the "incongruity" school of comic theory include Kant, for whom comedy arises from a discrepancy between the conceptual and the actual ("Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing" [quoted in Simon 1985: 192] ) and Schopenhauer, who believed that

The cause of laughter is ... the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects to which it has been related in our mind ... All laughter is therefore occasioned by a paradox, and therefore by unexpected assimilation ...

(quoted in Howarth 1978: 13)

Hazlitt also has a foot in this camp, maintaining that "the essence of the laughable ... is the incongruous, the disconnecting one idea from another, or the
jostling of one feeling against another" (Hazlitt 1951: 7). Among more recent critics Neil Schaeffer suggests that "laughter results from an incongruity presented in a ludicrous context", that is "a context based upon the absence of rationality, morality, and work" (Schaeffer 1981: 17). Writers known for their verbal wit, such as Pope, Johnson, Austen, Wilde and Waugh often rely on incongruity, and it is, as I hope to show, the bedrock of much of Joseph Heller's comedy.

The leading proponent of the "relief" theory is undoubtedly Freud, for whom comedy is characterised by "the sudden burst of laughter" which accompanies the release of a repressed impulse and for whom the purpose of jokes is to "evade restrictions and open sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible" (Freud 1976: 147). Later enthusiasts include Bakhtin, who sees comedy as a liberating force, a relief from the dictates of authority; Edward L. Galligan, who argues that "laughter is a reflex that enables the body to puff away the consequences of emotions" (Galligan 1984: 10), and T.G.A. Nelson, who suggests that comedy emancipates "irresponsible energy and fun" (Nelson 1990: 72). We find comedy of this sort in writers like Rabelais, Swift, Joyce and - as we shall see later - in Philip Roth.

What links Hobbes, Hazlitt, Bergson, Schopenhauer, Kant and Freud is their common emphasis on the immediacy of laughter, their understanding that it is an instantaneous response. Because it depends to such a degree on the moment - on the suddenness of apprehension - retrospective analysis of the causes of laughter tends to seem at best inadequate, at worst useless. Hence, when the relating of an incident that occasioned great hilarity meets with stony silence or looks of bemusement, one can only resort to phrases such as "you had to be there", or "well, it seemed funny at the time." For professionals as well as amateurs, timing is all-important: in a stand-up

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4 Although he takes his cue in this, as in much else (notably the connection between comedy and dreams - Bergson notes that "There are ... comic obsessions that bear a great resemblance to dream obsessions") from Bergson, who suggests that "comedy relieves us from the strain of thinking" (Bergson 1900 in Sypher 1980: 182, 187).
routine or in a stage comedy, a good line can be ruined by bad timing and a bad one redeemed by good timing.

Laughter, however, is not synonymous with comedy, despite the frequent conflation of the terms that we find in criticism. All the writers quoted above equate comedy with laughter, often using the terms as though they were interchangeable: two of the most famous and influential contributions to comic theory, by Bergson and Baudelaire, have (according to their titles, at any rate) actually been on the subject of laughter. Of course the two are closely connected, but laughter is not always comic (think of the nervous, anxious, forced laugh of someone attempting to deny fear, or the desperate, hysterical laughter of someone in shock, or suffering from a mental illness), "nor", as Ben Jonson observed, some three hundred years before Bergson, "is the moving of laughter always the end of comedy" (quoted in Sypher 1980: 205.) Although the contention that comedy is a serious business has become something of a cliché, confusion between laughter, humour, jokes and comedy continues to cloud thinking and writing about comedy, plaguing even those accounts in which distinctions between these terms are acknowledged rather than elided.

In Freud's Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious, for example, in spite of its structure - which attempts to isolate jokes, humour, and the comic as separate phenomena - we often find these nice classifications blurring, leading to confusing self-contradictions. In the section on "Jokes and the Comic", for example, Freud writes:

> The type of the comic which stands nearest to jokes is the naïve. Like the comic in general, the naïve is 'found' and not, like a joke, 'made'.

(Freud 1976: 240)

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5 T.G.A. Nelson, in his study of comedy, quotes Umberto Eco:

> From antiquity to Freud or Bergson, every attempt to define comic seems to be jeopardized by the fact that this is an umbrella term ... that gathers together a disturbing ensemble of diverse and not completely homogenous phenomena, such as humor, comedy, grotesque, parody, satire, wit and so on.

(Nelson 1990: 22)
A few pages later, however, we are told that "children often represent themselves as naïve, so as to enjoy a liberty that they would not otherwise be granted" (Freud 1976: 243), and we are treated to a tortuous explanation of why a naïve joke was not, in fact, a joke, in which Freud appears to be protesting too much:

This might have been a joke - even a tolerably good one - ... if the child had had the slightest notion of the possibility of the double meaning. [my italics]

(Freud 1976: 243)

The italicised words here evince a syntactical strain that reflects Freud's straining to retain his distinction between jokes and the comic.6

Confusion reigns not just over the causes of comedy (superiority, incongruity, relief etc.) and over the vocabulary we should use to describe those causes (laughter, humour, wit, the comic etc.) but also over the meaning of comedy. Three areas of controversy, in particular, dog the search for a poetics of comedy: religion, politics and selfhood.

Baudelaire perceives a propensity for comedy as "one of the clearest marks of Satan in man" (a view shared by the murderous monk Burgos in Umberto Eco's The Name of the Rose and - at times - by the narrator of Kundera's The Book of Laughter and Forgetting) and as an "attribute of madness" (Baudelaire 1992: 145, 143). In this he is supported by Ecclesiastes, for whom laughter "is mad" (2:2) and a characteristic of fools (7:6) and by Job, who observes that "the just upright man is laughed to scorn" (12:4). Hazlitt, too, sees comedy as a vice rather than a virtue, lying being "a species

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6 Part of the confusion over the boundaries between these different terms for the English reader of Freud is of course due to the problems of translation (there being an inexact correspondence between the German words and their closest English equivalents), but I believe that Freud himself is aware of the problematic nature of his formulas, and that this awareness manifests itself (as it does elsewhere in his writings) through lapses into convoluted syntax and redundant rhetorical flourishes.
of wit and humour" (Hazlitt 1951: 11). Against this, however, we have the tradition, expressed most famously in the title of Dante's great work, that sees comedy as divine - a redemptive force. In this tradition stand critics such as Suzanne Langer, for whom the significance of the etymology of the word comedy derives from the fact "that the Comus was a fertility rite, and the god it celebrated a fertility god, a symbol of perpetual rebirth, eternal life" (Langer 1953 in Corrigan 1981: 71), Northrop Frye, for whom comedy is the regenerative part of the life-cycle, and Bakhtin, for whom comedy "celebrates the destruction of the old and the birth of the new world" and amounts to a "second revelation of the world in play and laughter" (Bakhtin 1968: 410, 84).

Bakhtin's religiose tone is clearly audible in the work of modern comic theorists such as Robert Corrigan, for whom "The spirit of comedy is the spirit of resurrection" (Corrigan 1981: 8).

No less influential on the development of comic theory have been Bakhtin's claims for comedy as an instrument of political subversion and in these, as in much else, he has taken Freud as his starting-point. Like Meredith, for whom comedy is a civilising force, characterised by "unrivalled politeness" (Meredith 1877 in Sypher 1980: 47) and Bergson, for whom it is "the business of laughter to repress any separatist tendency" (Bergson 1900 in Sypher 1980: 174), Freud sees comedy as an essentially conservative force in society. Occasionally, however, he hints at a more subversive role, as when, for example, he suggests that tendentious jokes are especially favoured in order to make aggressiveness or criticism possible against persons in exalted positions who claim to exercise authority. The joke then represents a rebellion against that authority, a liberation from its pressure.

(Freud 1976: 149)

This anticipates Bakhtin's concept of carnivalesque comedy (as outlined in *Rabelais and His World*), which, although it owes much to Freud's work, differs fundamentally in representing comedy as an expression of, and instrument for,
nonconformity - an iconoclastic social force. Like Freud, Bakhtin sees comedy as an agent that enables us to free ourselves from the constraints of our internalised authorities (in Freudian terms, the superego), but for Bakhtin there is a social and political corollary: "Laughter liberates not merely from external censorship, but first of all from the great internal censor" (Bakhtin 1968: 94). Bakhtin pushes this idea further, arguing that comedy is inimical to all kinds of repression, whether private or public: "Laughter," he says, "overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations. Its idiom is never used by violence and authority" (Bakhtin 1968: 90).

This statement, like much in Bakhtin, is naively Utopian (the Nazis, after all, used parody and caricature in their propaganda). Yet Bakhtin's instinct that there is something inherently subversive about comedy is certainly one that finds an echo in other writers. Brecht's The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui and Jarry's Ubu Roi are two modern plays that spring to mind but, as Daniel Gerould points out in his essay on comedy and tyranny, tyrants of one sort or another have long been traditional targets for comedy - "the senex of Roman drama, the pedants and doctors of commedia dell'arte, and all the despotic parents and jealous husbands peopling the stage since the time of Molière and the English Restoration dramatists" (Gerould 1978 in Charney 1978: 3). George Orwell also perceives an anti-authoritarian bias in comedy, an irreverence that falls short, however, of threatening any lasting social change. In his essay "Funny, but not Vulgar", he suggests that

a thing is funny when - in some way that is not actually offensive or frightening - it upsets the established order. Every joke is a tiny revolution.

(Orwell 1968: 284)

Orwell goes on to stress that comedy's "aim is not to degrade the human being

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7 His nostalgia for a bygone era when comedy was a pure expression of the spirit of the people, for example, ignores the fact that the authorities not only permitted, but actually sponsored, some of the carnivalesque events to which he refers.
but to remind him that he is already degraded" (Orwell 1968: 285-6), an idea also present in Freud, for whom scatological comedy acts as "an admonition" that even the most exalted of men "is after all only human like you and me" (Freud 1976: 263), and in Bakhtin's "material bodily principle," which "hurl[s] [mankind] down to the reproductive lower stratum" (Bakhtin 1968: 21).

If, as Freud, Orwell and Bakhtin suggest, the function of comedy is to remind man of his essential "materialised" nature, to restore him to his "ambivalent wholeness" (Bakhtin 1968: 123), then we would expect self-consciousness to be inimical to comedy. Indeed, Baudelaire claims that "one of the most distinctive signs of the absolute comic is to be unconscious of itself" (Baudelaire 1992: 160) and Bergson argues that "a comic character is generally comic in proportion to his ignorance of himself" (Bergson 1900 in Sypher 1980: 71). "The comic person is unconscious," according to Bergson, and the essence of comedy lies in "mechanical inelasticity", a person becomes comic as soon as he forgets his humanity, as soon as he behaves automatically (Bergson 1900 in Sypher 1980: 71, 73). While this is certainly true in Molière (whom Bergson takes as his paradigmatic comic writer), where monomaniacs like Harpagon display all the "rigidity" that Bergson prescribes for a comic butt, it does not apply to characters such as Falstaff (who declares that no man is "able to invent any thing that intends to laughter more than I invent or is invented on me" [2. Henry IV: 1 ii 8-9]) or Becky Sharp (who relates an anecdote "with a fun she could not disguise, even though it was at her own expense" [Thackeray 1983: 528]). They are simultaneously satirists and objects of satire; self-conscious comedians who parody themselves, as well as others. Walter Kerr may have this type of self-satire in mind when he suggests that "there is always an element of exasperation with self ... in comedy" (Kerr 1967 in Corrigan 1981: 142) and other modern critics have insisted on an affinity between comedy and self-consciousness. George McFadden, for instance, argues that for modern readers "the comic arises from their sense of the activity of ... self-maintenance, self-definition, and self-sustenance" (McFadden 1982: 11) and
Richard Keller Simon boldly proclaims that "Comedy has been self-conscious since Aristophanes" (Simon 1985: 4).

Nevertheless, the idea persists that self-consciousness and comedy cannot coexist. In his study *The Comic Vision in Literature* Edward L. Galligan endorses William Lynch's view (as expressed in his book *Christ and Apollo*) that "the one offense ... which comedy cannot endure is that a man should forget he is a man" (Galligan 1984: 36). When he attempts to elaborate on this theme, however, Galligan runs into difficulties. He argues that

> the comic vision calls for ... a negligent disregard for who and what the self may be, a casual assumption that the question of identity is not worth worrying about. A pressing concern for identity is melodramatic, not comic.  
> (Galligan 1984: 119)

One might point out here that melodrama and comedy are not mutually exclusive; indeed, to the modern sensibility, melodrama can often tip over into comedy and self-parody. However, Galligan himself is perhaps residually aware of the inadequacy of his formulation, for he continues to worry away at it, like an itch that becomes more acute with each attempt to scratch it. "The comic vision", he resumes a few pages on,

> requires one to settle for, or cultivate, a blurred, indeterminate sense of one's own identity. Lines of demarcation between the self and the not-self are neither important nor interesting, and they are confusing.  
> (Galligan 1984: 124)

Confusing? Yes - as Galligan's confusing and confused attempts to resolve the question illustrate. To settle for something is hardly the same as to cultivate it, in spite of Galligan's attempt to elide the distinction. Neither important nor interesting? Well, quite apart from the fact that there would not seem to be a great deal of point in spending so much time on a subject devoid of interest and importance, one might direct Galligan's attention to *Amphitryon* - a comedy so archetypal in its appeal that it
has inspired at least thirty-eight different versions - whose central theme is precisely the demarcation between the self and the not-self.

Galligan appears to have perceived, at some level, that the notion of the self often plays a vital role in comedy, but has found the task of disentangling the threads of their intertwining relationship an impossibly vexing one and has eventually tried to dismiss the problem altogether by claiming that its importance lies in its lack of importance!

The confusion is not confined to Galligan. Bellow's enigmatic remark that "modern comedy has to do with the disintegrating outline of the worthy and humane Self, the bourgeois hero of an earlier age" is itself rather blurred in outline, and tentative in tone, exhibiting a nostalgia for a bygone self that was "worthy and humane" while at the same time employing Freudian and Marxist terms that undermine this sentimental view of history (Bellow 1963:28). Like Galligan, Bellow employs the metaphor of the self as an outline that can be clearly defined, or blurred. Like comedy, the self defies definition. It is instinctively understood to exist, yet when we begin to distrust our instincts and seek to explain it, it becomes indistinct. Is this the connection that Bellow's formulation implies? Is Bellow positing an affinity between the modern consciousness that lacks the privileged certainties of earlier ages (from Nietzsche's announcement of the death of God to Barthes' announcement of the death of the author, traditional icons have been shattered, traditional authorities debunked), and the comic form (or comic forms), whose boundaries have always resisted delineation?

Bellow does not tell us what he means by "modern comedy", but we may find a clue in his remarks in an essay on Mozart:

"modern" is a curious term: it can be used to degrade as well as (or more often than) to elevate. It can mean decadent, degenerate, nihilistic, abysmal, at one end - or it can signify a capacity to overcome contemporary disorder, or to

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8 The title of Giraudoux's play *Amphitryon 38* (first performed in 1929) refers to the fact that it is the thirty-eighth version of Plautus's original.
adumbrate a stage in the formation of a new superiority, or to begin to distill a new essence. It can mean that the best of contemporary minds show qualities of power, subtlety, scope, and resourcefulness, of infinite plasticity, adaptability and the courage to cope with all that world history has dumped on the generation of this present age.

(Bellow 1994: 6)

The evident bias here in favour of the latter, more positive connotations of the term, suggest that this is the sense in which Bellow is using it in his earlier essay. For Bellow, comedy represents a courageous response to the horrors of twentieth-century history - it is presumably these horrors that Herzog has in mind when he calls his "An age of special comedy" (Bellow 1965a: 163). Christopher Fry voices similar sentiments:

there are times in the state of man when comedy has a special worth, and the present is one of them: a time when the loudest faith has been faith in a trampling materialism, when literature has been thought unrealistic which did not mark and remark our poverty and doom.

(Fry 1951 in Corrigan 1981: 18)

However, well before Bellow and Fry, and Hitler and Stalin, Kierkegaard was writing that "no age has so fallen victim to the comic as this" (quoted in Sypher 1956 in Sypher 1980: 196), the phrase "to fall victim to" implying that comedy is a metaphysical condition to be endured rather than enjoyed - a state of instability and vulnerability. Bellow seems to share this anxiety over the dissolution of the worthy and humane values of an earlier age, but whereas for Kierkegaard comedy is a symptom of disorder, for Bellow it is a defense against disorder, a sort of rearguard resistance to the forces of anarchy - an act of self-affirmation.

Where does all this leave us? Is there any way of reconciling these conflicting views of comedy, or must we simply admit defeat? In his book Comedy: The Irrational Vision Morton Gurewitch laments the protean nature of comedy as it is characterised in Wylie Sypher's essay "The Meanings of Comedy":
after a while ... the term "comedy" gets buried beneath an avalanche of miscellaneous, conflicting attributes, so that comedy threatens to become all things to all men.

(Gurewitch 1975: 42)

Comedy is indeed all things to some men (though not to Sypher) Kierkegaard believed that "The comical is present in every stage of life, for wherever there is life there is contradiction" (quoted in Sypher 1956 in Sypher 1980: 196), George Santayana argues that "Existence ... is comic inherently" (Santayana 1922 in Corrigan 1981: 55) and Patrick O' Neill claims that "Simply being ... tends inevitably in the direction of comedy" (O' Neill 1990: 22). However, these assertions are true only of comedy in the largest sense - that in which Balzac uses it in his Human Comedy. They do not bring us any closer to a sense of what comedy as a distinct genre might be.

To say that comedy is life itself is at best an oversimplification, at worst entirely misleading; to say that comedy manifests itself in many different forms, some of which are not merely incompatible with, but antithetical to, each other, seems to me more accurate. For some it is an instinctive mood, for others an appeal to pure intellect; for some an assertion of superiority, for others an admission of weakness; for some an exclusive, divisive force, for others an inclusive, unifying one; for some a conservative social corrective, admonishing deviants to submit to the edicts of convention, for others a socially subversive challenge to established norms, a threat to hierarchical orders; for some evidence of sanity and the presence of the divine spirit, for others a sign of madness and a proof of satanic corruption.

For a traditional critic such as Gurewitch this is semantic anarchy, but for enthusiasts of the postmodern this multivalency signifies a Utopian open-endedness: a kaleidoscopic, dialectical (or, as Bakhtin would have it, dialogical) dynamic that confounds the monologic, univocal limits imposed on it by comic theories and comic theorists. Lance Olsen argues that postmodernism and comedy are natural bedfellows ("Because both the comic and the postmodern attempt to subvert all centers of authority ... they tend to complement each other well" [Olsen 1990: 31] ) and the
post-modernist Italian novelist Italo Calvino says that he uses comedy as "a way to escape from the limitations and one-sidedness of every representation and every judgment" (Calvino 1986: 63). Edward L. Galligan endorses this vision of comedy as a spirit of alternatives:

Comedy distrusts assertions and explanations ... Assertions and explanations are attempts to make words mean this, not that, comedy prefers to celebrate both this and that as simultaneously possible.

(Galligan 1984: x)

As usual, in his zeal Galligan over-simplifies matters somewhat, for assertions are not the same as explanations and, moreover, to adapt one of Zeno's paradoxes, if comedy distrusts assertions, then it is likely also to distrust the assertion that it distrusts assertions. Nevertheless, it may be that the only possible poetics of comedy is an anti-poetics (a rejection of the notion of a blueprint in favour of a number of different templates, each subject to variation), and that the impulse to explain may be at odds with the comic impulse. In the rest of this chapter I intend to examine the ways in which Bellow, Roth and Heller attempt to explain themselves, within and without their fiction, in terms of their status as comic writers, and the tension between these explanations and their comic practice.

**Masturbation and its Discontents; or Serious Relief: The Freudian Comedy of Philip Roth**

Most studies of Philip Roth make much of his comedy, some see it as his defining characteristic, but few attempt to place his comic art in a theoretical or historical context. Two of the books on Roth have focused on his comedy; neither has done him any favours. The first, Sanford Pinsker's *The Comedy That "Hoits"*, although it concludes with a ringing eulogy - "He has taught us all how painfully complicated it is to laugh" - is full of faint praise that damns, or seems designed to
damn (Pinsker 1975: 121). Moreover, the comedy that "hoits" is otherwise variously characterised as "a smart-alecky, cruel laughter," "shrill ... chest-thumpingly adolescent" and "sophomoric and self-indulgent" (Pinsker 1975: 25, 42, 73).9

The most recent book-length study of Roth, J. Halio's *Philip Roth Revisited* presents itself as "an attempt to define and to demonstrate Roth's abilities as a specifically comic writer" (Halio 1992: 1). From the outset, however, it is clear that Halio's conception of comedy is rather narrow. While Roth's comedy is "often broader and more obviously funny [than that of Bellow and Malamud]"10 ... None of this denies his seriousness, which is, like the others', [sic] to discover and, if possible, reaffirm values in our common human existence" (Halio 1992: 3). This tells us more about Halio's view of comedy than Roth's. For Halio, comedy is only worthwhile when in the service of a clear moral agenda. Hence, in his opening chapter on *Goodbye, Columbus,*11 Halio tells us that in this novella we find "observations that not only are funny in themselves but serve as social commentary" and that the "portraits Roth draws are not only funny in themselves ... they say something about Neil and ... the world he lives in" (Halio 1992: 21, 22). Statements such as these (and Halio's book is full of them) are not strictly inaccurate, but they are vague and platitudinous, and, taken cumulatively, they produce a distorted picture of Roth's work, which, while certainly concerned with questions of morality, is not moralistic or sententious. So prescriptive is Halio's conception of comedy, and so insistent is his categorisation of

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9 In a more recent essay on Roth, "Deconstruction as Apology: The Counterfictions of Philip Roth," Pinsker argues that "his congenial themes and characteristic techniques have taken an increasingly post-modernist turn" and that this heightened self-consciousness is the result of the response to *Portnoy's Complaint,* from which Roth has "never quite recovered" (Pinsker 1990: 137, 138).

10 Although Halio begins his introduction by telling us that Roth is often "misleadingly grouped with Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud," he spends the rest of it comparing Roth with them. (Halio 1992: 1).

11 Halio's book proceeds, for the most part, chronologically, looking at each of Roth's works in turn and spending a great deal of time simply rehearsing their plots.
Roth as a comic writer, that he dismisses *Letting Go* as "a mistake ... tedious ... Roth's least typical novel" and argues that *When She Was Good* (Roth's one undeniably tragic novel) is a sort of comedy *manqué* in which the comedy is "floating", "submerged" or "drowned" (Halio 1992: 37, 57). After this, it comes as no surprise that Halio judges Roth's satire on McCarthyism in *The Great American Novel* "Distasteful and outdated" (Halio 1992: 122). Overall, in this book, Halio is an exemplar of the critic who comes to praise comedy but does so in such a humourless fashion that he ends up burying it.

Of the other writers who have written on Roth's comedy, Mark Schechner perceives a "failure of magnanimity", suggesting that Roth's books bring "laughter without cheer" and that "his ample wit sports a chilling, mechanical edge" (Schechner 1974 in Pinsker 1982: 119); Donald G. Watson, in a Bakhtinian reading of Roth's work of the early seventies that perversely never mentions Bakhtin, argues that Roth "places himself within the traditions of carnivalesque comedy" and that "his fictions renew and regenerate, bury and revive" (Watson 1988 in Milbauer & Watson 1988: 108); David Monaghan sees Roth as a satirist whose aim is "to reveal the tragicomic gap between the life of moral seriousness and dignity presented by literature and the crude farce of reality" (Monaghan 1975 in Pinsker 1982: 76); Howard Eiland characterises Roth's fiction as "tragedy verging on farce" (Eiland 1982 in Pinsker 1982: 256); Alan Cooper (taking his cue from Roth's remarks about the influence of Kafka on *Portnoy's Complaint*) defines Roth's comedy as "sit-down comedy ... rationalism being explored minutely while being ignored grossly" (Cooper 1987 in Cohen 1987: 168); Laurence E. Mintz sees in Roth's work "the entire spectrum of all the comic, from the ridiculous to at least a quest for the sublime" (Mintz 1989: 156), while for Julian Barnes Roth's comedy comes down to basics: "Roth isn't urbanely witty, or chucklingly ironic or wry and dry: he's just ... fucking funny" (Barnes 1987: 7).

Roth's own view of the role that comedy plays in his work is decidedly positive. Although several of the stories collected in *Goodbye Columbus* (not least the title-novella) are satirical in style and contain many comic situations, Roth's first two novels
(Letting Go and When She Was Good) are primarily earnest (some might say over-earnest) works; imitations of, or homages to, Roth's literary heroes. With Portnoy's Complaint, Roth suggests, he threw off the shackles of his literary paternity:

It was a book that ... liberat(ed) me from an apprentice's literary models, particularly from the awesome graduate-school authority of Henry James ... and from the example of Flaubert ...

(Roth 1988a: 157)

It is one of the paradoxes of Roth's work (in which psychoanalytic, particularly Freudian, ideas abound) that, at the same time as the novels themselves tend to represent psychoanalysis as reductive and pseudo-scientific, Roth's explanations of his artistic processes are typically couched in therapeutic terms. Writing of the conception and execution of Portnoy's Complaint, Roth recalls in Reading Myself and Others that, "after several arduous years spent on When She Was Good ... I was aching to write something freewheeling and funny" and that "it was not until I had got hold of guilt ... as a comic idea [that I began] to feel myself lifting free and clear" (Roth 1985b: 21-2). Thirteen years later, in The Facts, he remarks more explicitly on the

12 The imagery here - of impulsive travel and unconstrained flight - is reminiscent of that of Augie March, in which birds and flight play such an important part, and whose picaresque structure reflects the nature of a hero who has "trouble being still," whose "wheels turned too freely" and who describes himself as "the by-blows of a travelling man" (Bellow 1954a: 514, 194, 125). Indeed, as we shall see, there are close resemblances between Roth's account of his discovery of his own - comic - voice in Portnoy's Complaint and Bellow's account of the composition of Augie March. Norman Mailer, writing in The Armies of the Night of his compositional method for Why Are We in Vietnam?, expresses himself in similar terms.

[I had] kicked goodbye ... to the old literary corset of good taste, letting [my] sense of language play on obscenity as freely as it wished, so discovering that everything [I] knew about the American language (with its incommensurable resources) went flying in and out of the line of [my] prose with the happiest of beating wings.

(quoted in Guttmann 1971: 167)
relationship between Portnoy's analysis and his own:

What had begun as a hopped-up, semi-falsified version of an analytic monologue that might have been mine ... had gradually been transformed into a full-scale comical counter-analysis.

(Roth 1988a: 156)

For Roth, then, the analysand's monologue was a relief and a release. A relief from the high seriousness of the artist's vocation, from the vows of James's "sacred office" (James 1986a: 167); a release of his - hitherto largely repressed - comic instincts. As the phrase "counter-analysis" suggests, Portnoy's analysis inverts Roth's experience. For Alex, too, seeks relief, but in his case it is relief from comedy, from the absurd indignities of his life, from the "Jewish joke" in which he feels he is trapped. Alex is not liberated by comedy, but imprisoned by it: he pleads with Spielvogel (and, by extension, with the reader) to be released from the role of comic butt - to be taken seriously - and yet this very earnestness is itself hilarious (the best comedians tend not to laugh at their own jokes - indeed, they often feign indignation or incomprehension at the laughter that greets them, which of course increases that laughter). This self-reflexivity - the way in which the comedy of Portnoy's Complaint seems to contemplate and explain itself - has been little commented on. Nor has much been said about its use (and abuse) of psychoanalysis. Yet it seems to me that these two facets of the novel - which are closely related to each other - provide a very useful context within which to think about the sources of its comedy.

Despite the vast amount of criticism the book has attracted, there have been few attempts to locate it in any comic tradition. Sheldon Grebstein, in an essay entitled "The Comic Anatomy of Portnoy's Complaint", suggests two possible contexts in which the novel's comedy might be read: the stand-up routines of contemporary comedians ("To approach Portnoy's Complaint as a 'literary work' seems a little pretentious. The word 'performance' appears to be much more appropriate"), and "the colloquial seriocomic monologue and tall tale, originally developed by the Old
Southwestern humorists and perfected by Mark Twain" (Grebstein 1978 in Cohen 1978: 153, 157). Allen Guttmann, in contrast, argues that the novel's principal debt is to Yiddish comedy, Portnoy being "the most pathetic of schlemiels, a grotesquely parodied version of the comic figures of nineteenth-century Yiddish fiction" (Guttmann 1973 in Rubin 1973: 335). These are interesting suggestions, but there are (as far as I am aware) no explicit allusions to Southern American humorists or Yiddish writers within the novel, and only a fleeting mention of stand-up comics. Nor, if we are to trust the tale rather than the teller, does Kafka exercise a decisive influence here. In fact the most ubiquitous references in *Portnoy's Complaint* are not to any literary figures or traditions, but to psychoanalytic discourse and, in particular, to Freud.

Asked to review Roth's novel, Bruno Bettelheim decided instead to write what he calls a "satire" on the novel. Presented in the guise of "Therapy Notes Found in the Files of Dr. O. Spielvogel, a New York Psychoanalyst", Bettelheim's essay - "Portnoy Psychoanalysed" - is essentially an orthodox Freudian reading of Roth's novel. Bettelheim's Spielvogel acknowledges Portnoy's familiarity with psychoanalytic discourse but laments his ignorant application of it, claiming that he misunderstands the fundamental purpose of analysis and wrongly diagnoses his own condition. Reviewing his patient's characterisation of his parents, however, Bettelheim's Spielvogel detects "a satire on the dominating and castrating father, and a mother too involved in herself to pay much attention to her son" (Bettelheim 1979: 390). This is an acute observation: Portnoy's reversal of the conventional Oedipal roles is wilful and Roth's novel is indeed a satirical review, or reappraisal, of Freudian orthodoxy. Where does this leave Bettelheim's piece, however? It would appear to occupy the somewhat anomalous

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13 Roth claims to have been much influenced by Kafka when writing the novel and Portnoy at one point sees "shades of Gregor Samsa" in his plight, but there is actually little that is Kafkaesque in *Portnoy's Complaint* (Roth 1986: 112). It is only later in Roth's career that the shadow of Kafka looms large.
position of a satire upon a satire. The situation is more complicated still, however, because *Portnoy's Complaint* is not simply Roth's satirical rereading of Freud refracted through the monologue of an "extremely narcissistic and exhibitionistic" Jewish son: it is a novel which invites us to read its rereading of Freud in Freudian terms, while at the same time proposing an alternative system of self-explanation (Bettelheim 1979: 388).

The first explicit reference to psychoanalysis in the novel occurs before the novel proper has started. After some biographical details, the title-page and the publication details, the reader encounters what appears to be a dictionary definition of "Portnoy's Complaint," which quotes an extract from an essay by one O. Spielvogel, published in an academic journal of psychoanalysis (Roth 1986: 5). That this is a mock-definition is clear, if not from the substance of the definition itself, then certainly from the title of the essay ("The Puzzled Penis"). Because it stands outside the main narration we may be tempted to read it as evidence of authorial scorn for the absurdities of psychoanalytic discourse. However, the novel itself is decidedly ambivalent in its uses of psychoanalysis. The very fact that he has entered therapy suggests that Alex has some faith in the process, but of course Alex is no ordinary patient. He is not content to leave the interpretation of his behaviour to his analyst. Instead, he compulsively explains himself, and then explains his explanations.

Consider the opening sentence of the novel proper: "She was so deeply embedded in my consciousness that for the first year of school I seem to have believed that each of my teachers was my mother in disguise" (Roth 1986: 7) Alex's belief in his mother's protean powers of self-transformation is of course an early manifestation of the guilty fear (which is at the same time the exhibitionistic desire) of being observed while being naughty, which Alex displays throughout his life.14 This is the

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14 As an adolescent addict of onanism, Alex constantly fears that he will be exposed *in flagrante delictae*. During one of his sessions in the bathroom, Alex is interrupted by the sound of his mother.
Freudian interpretation implicit in the further admission that, despite rushing home after school in the hope that she might not have had time to shed her latest skin, "it was always a relief not to have caught her between incarnations", because of "the burden of betrayal that I imagined would fall on me if I ever came upon her unawares" (Roth 1986: 7). However, the unusual tense of "seem to have believed" expresses uncertainty about the very explanation he is offering of himself, a comical scepticism (comical because it implicitly distrusts such self-explanation) of his reliability as a vigorously shaking the doorknob. Of the door I have finally forgotten to lock! I knew it would happen one day! Caught!

(Roth 1986: 23)

It turns out to be a false alarm, and Alex continues to masturbate, while fending off his mother's inquiries over the state of his digestive system. On another occasion, returning home on a bus having spent the day with his aunt and uncle, Alex takes the opportunity, while it is dark and most of the passengers are sleeping, to "whack off", his excitement clearly heightened by the danger of ejaculating over the blond shikse in the next seat. Like Peter Tarnopol in My Life as a Man, who confesses to Dr. Spielvogel (a rather more voluble presence in this novel than in Portnoy's Complaint) that he has taken to leaving traces of his sperm in friends' houses, Alex's auto-erotic activities seem to be a means of asserting his manhood - secretly in the first place, but always with the possibility of his private pleasure becoming a public display of potency. As Alex grows older, his fantasies of sexual exposure become more lurid and sensational. Visiting a burlesque house at the age of twelve, he imagines being caught in a police raid.

When the cops throw on the lights ... what if the flashbulbs go off! And get me - me, already president of the International Relations Club in my second year of high school!

(Roth 1986: 120)

This guilt fantasy has two themes which recur periodically. One is that of the good boy being exposed in the press as a fraud, a fear/desire which often manifests itself in the form of imagined mock-tabloid headlines such as "ASST HUMAN OPPY COMMISH FOUND HEADLESS IN GO-GO GIRL'S APT!", "ASST HUMAN OPPY COMMISH FLOGS DUMMY", "JEW SMOTHERS DEB WITH COCK" (Roth 1986: 148, 160, 218). The other is that of the apparently respectable citizen being brought to book by the police for his sordid sexual crimes. The novel concludes with a version of this scenario.
narrator that we find echoed periodically in the novel.

One of Alex's most vivid memories - "The scene itself is like some piece of heavy furniture that sits in my mind and will not budge" - is of an episode of bitter mutual recrimination between his parents, the cause of which, however, has become obscure (Roth 1986: 80). It appears to be prompted by the recollection of another episode. One night Alex's father brings one of his colleagues from work - "a thin, tense, shy, deferential, soft-spoken, aging cashier named Anne McCaffrey," who happens to have "a terrific pair of legs" - home "for a real Jewish meal" (Roth 1986: 78-9). Extrapolating from the implied association between these two memories, Alex feels that he has finally identified the source of his parents' disagreement: his father's infidelity with the *shikse* cashier. At this point, Alex suddenly pulls himself up:

> Oh, this is pure fantasy, this is right out of the casebook, is it not? No, no, that is nobody else's father but my own who now brings his fist down on the kitchen table and shouts back at her, "I did no such thing! That is a lie and wrong!" Only wait a minute - it's *me* who is screaming "I didn't do it!" *The culprit is me!*

(Roth 1986: 81)

Just when his father's guilt seems evident (note the bathetic tautology of "That is a lie and wrong!") Alex suddenly turns the tables. He rejects the theory that his mother had been accusing his father of adultery and decides that her anger originates instead from his refusal to punish Alex, who has done some "terrible thing" (Roth 1986: 81). Still, however, Alex is unsatisfied, and appeals to Spielvogel for help.

But look, what is going on here after all? Surely, Doctor, we can figure this thing out, two smart Jewish boys like ourselves ... a terrible act has been committed, and it has been committed by either my father or me. The wrongdoer, in other words, is one of the two members of the family with a penis. Okay. So far so good. Now: did he fuck between those luscious legs the gentile cashier from the office, or have I eaten my sister's chocolate pudding?

(Roth 1986: 81-2)
The great psychodrama thus resolves itself into a joke whose butt is psychoanalysis. Alex begins by reading his memory in Freudian terms, rejects the reading as too trite and predictable - "right out of the casebook" - to be true and then comically deflates our expectations (expectations raised by the assumptions of psychoanalysis that a traumatic memory such as this, whose origin appears to have been forgotten - that is repressed - is likely to contain material too disturbing for the patient to cope with) by conceding that the parental rift might have been caused as easily by a minor act of childish intemperance as by a betrayal of the marriage vows.

The matter does not end here, however. Just as Alex is reliving his guilty denial, the confusion between himself and his father - between the brother's betrayal of his sister and the father's betrayal of the mother - resurfaces.

Even if I did [eat the chocolate pudding], I didn't mean it! I thought it was something else! I swear, I swear, I didn't mean to do it! ... But is that me - or my father hollering out his defence before the jury? Sure, that's him - he did it, okay, okay, Sophie, leave me alone already, I did it, but I didn't mean it!

(Roth 1986: 82)

The blurring of identity between father and son here is enacted linguistically, as the third person ("Sure, that's him - he did it, okay") changes in mid-sentence to the first person ("okay, Sophie, leave me alone already") and the son's mitigating plea - "I didn't mean it!" - is echoed by the father. The earlier satirical rejection of the psychoanalytic approach is revealed as nothing more than the patient's customary resistance to a painful recognition, and the memory of the purloined chocolate pudding is exposed as an attempt to displace his father's expression of prohibited sexual appetite with a transgression prompted by a different sort of appetite.15

15 This identification between the ingestion of forbidden food and the enjoyment of forbidden sexual pleasure is made by Alex himself, who sees in the "prohibitive dietary rules" of Judaism an implicit admonition that those who "will eat anything ... will do anything as well" (Roth 1986: 75, 77).
Later in the novel, Alex invokes the suicide of Ronald Nimkin, an aspiring young pianist who lives in the same building, as an illustration of the lengths to which a Jewish mother can drive her son. The grieving Mrs. Nimkin shrieks at Mrs. Portnoy, "Why? Why? Why did he do this to us?" - her iterated expression of anguish recalling both Alex's reaction to his mother's deployment of a "long bread knife" to ensure that he eat up his dinner ("Doctor, why, why oh why oh why oh why does a mother pull a knife on her own son?") and Mrs. Portnoy's plaintive incredulity on the occasion when the young Alex kicked her and bit her: "Why ... why do you do such a thing?" (Roth 1986: 91, 19, 112). Alex takes it upon himself to reply on behalf of Ronald and Jewish sons everywhere:

BECAUSE YOU FUCKING JEWISH MOTHERS ARE TOO FUCKING MUCH TO BEAR! I have read Freud on Leonardo, Doctor, and pardon the hubris, but my fantasies exactly: this big smothering bird beating frantic wings about my face and mouth so that I cannot even get my breath. What do we want, me and Ronald and Leonardo? To be left alone!

(Roth 1986: 113)

Once again Alex begins by deferring to Freud's wisdom, alluding grandly to his essay on Leonardo Da Vinci, only to render the allusion (and, by implication, Freud's own reading of the artist's psyche) absurd with the bathetic conclusion that all would have been well with Leonardo (whom he brackets, with a chutzpah undiminished by his pretense of humility, with himself and Ronald Nimkin) if his mother had left him alone.

However, Alex's reading of Freud's reading of Leonardo's childhood memory is not merely satirically reductive: it is also highly idiosyncratic. According to Freud, Leonardo speaks not of "a big smothering bird beating frantic wings about my face and mouth" but of a vulture (a mistranslation of "nibio", which means "kite") which, as he lay in his cradle, "came down to me, and opened my mouth with its tail, and struck me many times with its tail against my lips" (Freud 1985: 172). For Freud, the significance of this dream is two-fold: it confirms (through a symbolic association between the "vulture" and the mother) that Leonardo "spent the critical first years of his life not by
the side of his father and stepmother, but with his poor, forsaken, real mother, so that he had no time to feel the absence of his father" and it points (through the association of the bird's tail with the penis, and thereby the beating of the tail inside the mouth with an act of fellatio) to Leonardo's suppressed homosexuality (Freud 1985: 182). Alex completely ignores the second of these symbolic interpretations, and focuses on the first, which is actually based on the misconception that the bird of Leonardo's dream was a vulture. Moreover, he neglects to follow Freud's argument that the two elements of the dream are linked in that Leonardo's development as a homosexual resulted from erotic feelings towards his mother, which he retained in later life, and which prevented him from forming mature sexual relationships with women.

In alluding only to the suffocating intimacy of Leonardo's relationship with his mother, Alex may be having a further joke at Freud's expense; highlighting the eagerness with which he seized upon a false detail in order to force Leonardo's biography into a preconceived psychoanalytical narrative. However, the Freudian explanation for Alex's selective reconstruction of Freud's observations is, clearly, that Alex is repressing the further identification between himself and Leonardo, the identification that would cast doubt on Alex's sexual identity. This explanation gains credence if we return to the context of Alex's reference to the Leonardo essay.

Alex remembers kicking and biting his mother, then retreating under his bed to escape the wrath of his father, who comes after him with a roar so loud that my normally placid sister runs to the kitchen, great gruntfuls of fear erupting from her mouth, and in what we now call the fetal position crouches down between the refrigerator and the wall. Or so I would seem to remember it - though it would make sense, I think, to ask how I know what is going on in the kitchen if I am still hiding beneath my bed.

(Roth 1986: 113)

Unaware of the inaccuracy of the translation on which he is relying, Freud goes to some lengths to explain that the vulture was a symbol of motherhood in Egyptian mythology, and to demonstrate Leonardo's probable knowledge of this fact.
The physical violence exhibited towards his mother is, in Freudian terms, a sublimated expression of desire for her, and the vengeful father completes the picture of Oedipal conflict. However, the most interesting aspect of Alex's reconstruction of this scene is the image of his sister cowering in fear - an image which, as Alex himself implies, must be an invented memory, as his own situation would have precluded any knowledge of his sister's whereabouts. Just as the earlier confusion in Alex's memories between himself and his father involved a displacement of guilt, so here Alex's guilt - and his retreat into the metaphorical womb under his bed (his mother's "broom still relentlessly trying to poke me out from my cave") - is displaced onto his sister (Roth 1986: 114). To a Freudian, however, the identification with the sister may have a further significance - it may suggest a repressed desire on Alex's part to be female. After all, we see in the case of Leonardo, and elsewhere in Freud's writings, that a dominant mother and an absent or weak father are conditions that are likely to lead to a homosexual development in a child, and Alex's father, this uncharacteristic display of virile rage notwithstanding, is a weak figure in the book, memorable chiefly for his comic battles with constipation (note also that Alex has no adult male friendships).

Through his insistent invocation of Freud, Alex invites us to psychoanalyse his self-analysis in this way, but of course in doing so we risk incurring Alex's comic fate: becoming the victims of an inchoate, exacerbated self-consciousness. At one point in the novel Alex breaks off in the midst of one of his kvetches to protest:

But why must I explain myself? Excuse myself! Why must I justify with my Honesty and Compassion my desires? So I have desires - only they're endless. Endless! And that, that may not be such a blessing, taking for a moment the psychoanalytic point of view ... But then all the unconscious can do anyway, so Freud tells us, is want. And want! And WANT!!17

(Roth 1986: 96)

17 Roth may well be having some incidental fun here at the expense of Bellow's Henderson the Rain King, whose eponymous hero hears an insistent voice within him intoning "I want, I want, I want!"
Typically, Alex explains his need to explain himself in Freudian terms, but remains unsatisfied by this explanation. Alex would like to take the psychoanalytic point of view, but it offers no solutions - no resolutions - to his plight. Instead, there is only perpetual conflict between the insistent demands of the id and the constant constraints of the superego. In his restless search for compromise and reconciliation, Alex vacillates between endorsing and rejecting the psychoanalytic point of view.

There are moments in the novel when he seems to view it with disdain, such as in his description of Mary Jane Reed's therapy sessions with Dr. Morris Frankel, whom Alex renames "Harpo".

Sometimes he coughs, sometimes he grunts, sometimes he belches, once in a while he farts, whether voluntarily or not who knows, though I hold that a fart has to be interpreted as a negative transference reaction on his part.  

(Roth 1986: 144)

Alex's comic animus here seems to be directed not just at Dr. Frankel, but at the absurd over-determination of psychoanalysis itself (in which even a fart might be interpreted as "a negative transference reaction"). Indeed, he often treats Freudian terminology with comic irreverence ("LET'S PUT THE ID BACK EN YID!"); "That tyrant, my superego, he should be strung up that son of a bitch, hung up by his fucking

18 This joke has an antecedent in Roth's short story "The Psychoanalytic Express" (published six years before Portnoy's Complaint and featuring one Dr. Spielvogel). The story follows the efforts of a bored housewife, Ella Wittig (a sort of sixties New York Emma Bovary), to find "deep pleasure and lasting passion (Roth 1963: 106). Like Alex, she struggles to reconcile her public demeanour with her private desires and goes to see Spielvogel in the hope that he can help her to find out "why she was most passionate when her sex life was most clandestine" (Roth 1963: 108). Determined, like Alex, to explain herself in ways that are more complex than the existing psychoanalytical narratives, she becomes absurdly deterministic.

She was beginning to be unwilling to think of anything as an accident. Dr. Spielvogel had only to shift in his chair, for her to fear that he was about to restrain an interpretation he considered not so significant as did she ...

(Roth 1963: 109)
storm-trooper's boots till he's dead!"; "Why do I run home ... To my Tollhouse cookie and my glass of milk, home to my nice clean bed! Oy, civilisation and its discontents!"

and sometimes caricatures Freud himself as a dogmatic and intellectually simplistic guru (Roth 1986: 115, 147-8, 167).

At other times, however, Alex is respectful, deferential, even ingratiating, towards Spielvogel and devout in his personal adherence to Freudian doctrine. When Alex tells Spielvogel of his father's parting words to him prior to his excursion to Europe with Mary Jane - "What if I die?" - he feels compelled to append a qualification:

Now whether the words I hear are the words spoken is something else again. And whether what I hear I hear out of compassion for him, out of my agony over the inevitability of this horrific occurrence, his death, or out of my eager anticipation of that event, is also something else again. But this of course you understand, this of course is your bread and your butter.

(Roth 1986: 111)

Alex is clearly intent on impressing Spielvogel with his analytic powers, while at the same time being careful not to usurp his authority or trespass on his professional territory. However, in spite of his reassurances - "this of course you understand" - the impression persists that Alex is not able fully to trust Spielvogel to arrive at an independent diagnosis of his condition.

Realising, like any good Freudian, that his childhood attitude towards his excretions may be significant, Alex admits to his dismay at having been unable to keep his underwear unsoiled:

Oh, Doctor, I wipe and I wipe and I wipe ... I wipe until that little orifice of mine is red as a raspberry; but still, much as I would like to please my mother by dropping into her laundry hamper at the end of each day jockey shorts such as might have encased the asshole of a little angel, I deliver forth instead (deliberately, Herr Doctor? - or just inevitably?) the fetid little drawers of a boy.

(Roth 1986: 47)
Again the suspicion remains that this passage has as much to do with Alex's desire to please his analyst as his desire to please his mother. As a boy at school Alex impresses his teachers with his academic prowess; as an adult he tries to impress his analyst with his command of psychoanalytic procedures. Everything - even the "pale and wispy brush-stroke" of shit at the bottom of his underwear - means something; everything has an unconscious motivation (Roth 1986: 47).

Later in the novel Alex pauses for breath, as it were, and takes stock of his mounting grievances.

Whew! Have I got grievances! Do I harbour hatreds I didn't even know were there? Is it the process, Doctor, or is it what we call 'the material'? ... I hear myself indulging in the kind of ritualized bellyaching that is just what gives psychoanalytic patients such a bad name with the general public.

(Roth 1986: 88)

Again, Alex is keen to advertise his credentials as an insider, a member of the psychoanalytic fraternity (note the use of "we" in his question to the doctor) and, moreover, as a "good" patient - one who will not indulge in self-pity but will attempt to understand his predicament. Paradoxically, however, Alex's desire to please - his willingness to mine his psychic life for deposits of repression and neurosis - is frustrated due not to a lack of "material", but to a superabundance of it. Chez Portnoy "nothing was ever simply nothing but always SOMETHING" (Roth 1986: 90). Instead of a buried "Oedipal drama" there is only transparent "farce" (Roth 1986: 242); instead of the subtleties of Freud's case-histories, with their latent dream-symbolism, with Alex it all happens in broad daylight! The disproportinate and the melodramatic, this is my daily bread! ... Who else do you know whose mother actually threatened him with the dreaded knife? Who else was so lucky as to have the threat of castration so straight-forwardly put by his momma?

(Roth 1986: 234)
For Alex, his mother brandishing a knife - ostensibly to encourage him to eat his dinner - is another episode in the Freudian Oedipal narrative "right out of the casebook". In "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex", Freud writes:

> When the (male) child's interest turns to his genitals ... the adults do not approve of this behaviour. More or less plainly more or less brutally [sic], a threat is pronounced that this part of him which he values so highly will be taken away from him. Usually it is from women that the threat emanates ...

(Freud 1986: 396)

Time and again, Portnoy's complaint is not that his case is intractable, but that it is all too tractable, too obvious: "you don't have to go digging where these people [his parents] are concerned - they wear the old unconscious on their sleeves!", "With a life like mine, Doctor, who needs dreams?", "Doctor, my psyche, it's about as difficult to understand as a grade-school primer! ... Who needs Freud? Rose Franzenblau has enough on the ball to come up with an analysis of somebody like me!" (Roth 1986: 91, 151, 165).

For Alex, the most galling aspect of his predicament is its corniness, its vulgarity, its *simplicity*. He pleads with the mute Spielvogel (who functions rather like the silent interlocutor in Browning's dramatic monologues - always present by implication, as the audience for whom the speaker performs, but never allowed to intrude in his own voice) not for an interpretation of his predicament (which he invariably supplies himself), but for a second opinion. That is, a more interesting, more satisfying, more *sophisticated* interpretation. When he asks Spielvogel the meaning of his violent desire for, and impotence with, Naomi, what he fears, above all, is confirmation of the banality of his case: "This mother-substitute! ... Oh please, it can't be as simplistic as that! Not me!" (Roth 1986: 242).

However, it is not entirely clear whether the banality of this reading is actually due to the banality of Alex's own psyche, or to the banality of the psychoanalytic Oedipal narrative itself. This is how Alex continues:
Because she [Naomi] wore red hair and freckles, this makes her, according to my unconscious one-track mind, my mother? ... Too much to swallow, I'm afraid! Oedipus Rex is a famous tragedy, schmuck, not another joke! You're a sadist, you're a quack and a lousy comedian! I mean this is maybe going too far for a laugh, Doctor Spielvogel, Doctor Freud, Doctor Kronkite!  

(Roth 1986: 242)

Alex's indignation here (his "favorite word in the English language" [Roth 1986: 155]) is aroused in the first place by the reductiveness of the psychoanalytic approach (the notion that the unconscious is perpetually "one-track"), a criticism which surfaces earlier, in the most explicit consideration of Freud in the novel:

Now, I am under the influence at the moment of an essay entitled 'The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life'; as you may have guessed, I have bought a set of Collected Papers, and since my return from Europe, have been putting myself to sleep each night ... with a volume of Freud in my hand. Sometimes Freud in hand, sometimes Alex in hand, frequently both. Yes, there in my unbuttoned pajamas all alone I lie, fiddling with it like a little boy-child in a dopey reverie, tugging on it, twisting it, rubbing and kneading it, and meanwhile reading spellbound through 'Contributions to the Psychology of Love,' ever heedful of the sentence, the phrase, the word that will liberate me from what I understand are called my fantasies and fixations.

19 The apposition between Spielvogel and Freud makes explicit what is implicit throughout the novel: that Alex's silent interlocutor is in a sense Freud himself, that the novel is a letter from a Jewish son to a Jewish father, a letter that testifies to, even while it debunks, the authority of that father. The inclusion of Walter Kronkite - that other figure of patriarchal authority and gravitas - in this trinity, may be a reference to Alex's recurring fantasies of exposure in the media, as well as another of those bathetic associations that serve to undermine the mystique of psychoanalysis. Kronkite, a guru of the media who is believed to have all the answers, is, by implication, no different in essence from Freud, a guru in a different field offering different answers. The direct address to Freud has a precedent in a short story by Roth published ten years earlier, entitled "The Love Vessel". The hero of the story, Sam, who has some of Alex's narcissistic paranoia ("Why did he see the whole world circling menacingly around him!") , is reluctantly carrying a can of dirt back from Israel - where he has spent time on a kibbutz - to America, when he realises that his fear that it will be stolen is actually a latent desire to get rid of it, whereupon he breaks out with the Portnovian apostrophe: "Oh Freud, Freud, don't you start picking on me!" (Roth 1959b: 55, 61).
In the 'Degradation' essay there is that phrase, 'currents of feeling'. 'For a fully normal attitude in love' (deserving of semantic scrutiny, that 'normal', but to go on -) ... it is necessary that two currents of feeling be united: the tender, affectionate feelings, and the sensuous feelings. And in many instances this just doesn't happen, sad to say. 'Where such men love they have no desire, and where they desire they cannot love'.

... Am I to consider myself one of the fragmented multitude? In language plain and simple, are Alexander Portnoy's sensual feelings fixated to his incestuous fantasies? ... Has a restriction so pathetic been laid upon my object choice?

(Roth 1986: 170)

As is clear from these two passages, however, there is more to Alex's critique of Freud than a protest at the dogmatism of psychoanalysis. Alex's criticisms of Freud are also linguistic, or literary, criticisms. In the first passage, Alex sees Freud's appropriation of the story of Oedipus as a demeaning of Sophocles' great tragedy to the level of a smutty joke; in the second, he draws attention to the sloppy imprecision of the term "normal" and to the obscurity of psychoanalytic terminology - language that is anything but "plain and simple". This literary sensibility is much in evidence throughout the novel, but the challenge it poses to Freud's psychoanalytic views is characteristically balanced (or undercut) by a Freudian counter-analysis.

In "The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life", Freud suggests that

the man ... feels his respect for the woman acting as a restriction on his sexual activity, and only develops full potency when he is with a debased sexual object ... This is the source of his need for a debased sexual object, a woman who is ethically inferior, to whom he need attribute no aesthetic scruples ...

(Freud 1977: 254)

At first glance, Alex's relationships with women seem to conform to this syndrome. He loses interest in Sarah Abbott Maulsby because she won't perform fellatio on him and in Mary Jane Reed when she complains of feeling humiliated after a series of three-in-a-bed sex sessions: when they refuse, that is, to fulfil the role of "a debased sexual object". He ends his relationship with Kay Campbell when she refuses to contemplate a conversion to Judaism and cannot manage an erection with Naomi
after she browbeats him for being a "self-hating Jew" (Roth 1986: 241): that is, when they assert their intellectual independence in terms that make it impossible for Alex to regard them as "ethically inferior".

Is Alex's lovelife simply more grist for the Freudian mill then? Not necessarily. Another way of looking at it is to say that Alex rejects these women not because he feels they deserve respect, but because he feels they don't, not because they do not behave as debased sexual objects but because they do not possess sufficiently rigorous aesthetic scruples: because, more specifically, they do not speak his language.

When he spends Thanksgiving with the Campbells, the greatest culture shock for Alex is the way they speak to each other. In Iowa, he soon discovers,

they feel the sunshine on their faces, and it just sets off some sort of chemical reaction: Good morning! Good morning! Good morning! sung to half a dozen different tunes! ... "Good morning," he [Mr. Campbell] says, and now it occurs to me that the word "morning," as he uses it, refers specifically to the hours between eight A.M. and twelve noon ... He wants the hours between eight and twelve to be good, which is to say, enjoyable, pleasurable, beneficial! We are all of us wishing each other four hours of pleasure and accomplishment! ... The English language is a form of communication! Conversation isn't just crossfire where you shoot and get shot at! Where you've got to duck for your life and aim to kill! Words aren't only bombs and bullets - no, they're little gifts, containing meanings!

(Roth 1986: 202)

Although Alex is ostensibly praising the good humour, politeness and straightforwardness of the Campbells, the overall effect of this passage is to highlight - comically - the conventionality, the banality of their language. The Campbells may use language to communicate with each other rather than, as the Portnoys do, to compete for rhetorical supremacy, but the linguistic richness of the Portnoys' complaints, when compared to the anodyne clichés of the Campbells, is incontestable. After she rejects the idea of converting, Alex begins to find Kay "boringly predictable in conversation, and about as desirable as blubber in bed", but why does he ask her, albeit jokingly, if she will convert in the first place and why does he feel indignant when she dismisses the notion (Roth 1986: 211)? The implication is that he has always found
her conversation boring and that his "joke" about conversion had been a way of precipitating recognition of that fact. Kay may be "hard as a gourd on matters of moral principle" but her discourse does not meet Alex's rigorous standards and hence she is fatally diminished in his eyes (Roth 1986: 198).

With Sarah Maulsby, too, it is apparently linguistic, rather than sexual differences, that drive them apart.

Why didn't I marry the girl? Well, there was her cutesy-wootsy boarding-school argot, for one. Couldn't bear it. "Barf" for vomit, "ticked off" for angry, "a howl" for funny, "crackers" for crazy, "teeny" for tiny. (Roth 1986: 213)

However, if Alex finds Kay's conversation boring and Sarah's language inane, they are at least well-educated women, and they share his intellectual concerns. With Mary Jane Reed the situation is somewhat different. Mary Jane "moves her lips when she reads" and she does not read very often (Roth 1986: 190). Sexually, she is the adept, the connoisseur, that Alex has longed for all his life, but he is not satisfied with this. He resolves "to improve her mind" (Roth 1986: 190).

It seems a futile cause - the gulf in education and manners seems incommensurable - until, on a driving holiday in Vermont, there is a breakthrough. In a mood of post-coital euphoria, Alex recites Yeats's "Leda and the Swan" to Mary Jane, then immediately regrets it,

realizing how tactless I had been, with what insensitivity I had drawn attention to the chasm: I am smart and you are dumb, that's what it had meant to recite to this woman one of the three poems I happen to have learned by heart in my thirty-three years. (Roth 1986: 176)

To his surprise, however, she is fascinated by the poem and insists that he explain it. This evidence of aesthetic scruples, far from dampening Alex's ardour, excites it, and the rest of the holiday is spent in a state of mutual bliss. It is this holiday
that Alex offers as testimony against the charge that his "affectionate feelings" and his "sensuous feelings" cannot be united. During those "few sunny days," he claims, "there was sensual feeling mixed with the purest, deepest streams of tenderness I've ever known!" (Roth 1986: 171). Characteristically, however, Roth provides us with the fuel for a Freudian deconstruction of Alex's rejection of Freud.

Even as he is embarking on the tale, Alex introduces a note of caution:

Was it tenderness for one another we experienced, or just the fall doing its work, swelling the gourd (John Keats) and lathering the tourist trade into ecstasies of nostalgia for the good and simple life?

(Roth 1986: 171)

At any rate, the pastoral idyll doesn't last long. On the journey home, Alex is once again lamenting her philistinism, censoring her vocabulary, parodying her slang.

"Like let's eat," I said. "Like food. Like nourishment, man."
"Look," she said, "maybe I don't know what I am, but you don't know what you want me to be, either! And don't forget that!"
"Groovy, man."

(Roth 1986: 181)

Mary Jane's response to Alex's goading is acute, as his refusal to respond to it illustrates (and later on in this exchange she parodies his slavish Freudianism: "can't I say hang-up either? Okay - it's a compulsion" [Roth 1986: 182]). Alex is indeed unsure of what he wants from her. Does his disdain for her language indicate disillusionment, or does it mask his relief that she is, after all, beyond the cultural pale? Does he really want to respect her, or is Alex's apparent compulsion to render her respectable nothing more than a desire to confirm that she is not respectable?
Alex's behaviour in Rome (when he engineers a three-way sexual spree) suggests the latter, as does his reluctance to use Mary Jane's name - or indeed Kay's or Sarah's - preferring instead to refer to them by the nicknames "The Monkey," "The Pumpkin" and "The Pilgrim" respectively. However, just as Alex's proposal that Kay convert and his insistence that Sarah perform fellatio provided pretexts for splits whose roots were linguistic rather than religious or sexual, so with Mary Jane the episode with the Roman prostitute is a symptom, rather than the cause, of the rift between them. The rift itself actually derives from an earlier incident in which Alex arrives at Mary Jane's apartment to take her to a dinner party hosted by the mayor of New York. At this stage, soon after the trip to Vermont, Alex is still hopeful that all will be well. While he is waiting for her to get ready, however, he discovers a note she has left for the cleaning-lady:

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dir willa polish the flor by bathrum pleze & dont furget the insies of windose mary jane r
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Three times I read the sentence through, and as happens with certain texts, each reading reveals new subtleties of meaning and implication, each reading augurs tribulations yet to be visited upon my ass. Why allow this "affair" to gather any more momentum? What was I thinking about in Vermont! Oh that z, that z between the two e's of 'pleze' - this is a mind with the depths of a movie marquee! and 'furget'! Exactly how a prostitute would misspell that word! But it's something about the mangling of 'dear', that tender syllable of affection now collapsed into three lower-case letters, that strikes me as hopelessly pathetic. How unnatural can a relationship be? This woman is ineducable and beyond reclamation.

(Roth 1986: 188)
Ironically attributing to Mary Jane’s ungrammatical, misspelt note the status of a "text" which "reveals new subtleties" with each successive "reading", Alex's disgust is aroused by linguistic degeneracy in a way that it never is by sexual degeneracy. Yet the two are implicitly linked in Alex's mind, as his remark that Mary Jane's "mangling" of language is "Exactly how a prostitute would misspell" suggests. Just as his subtle deconstruction of Kay's father's text "Good morning" serves only to reveal its essential vacuousness, so here Alex's attention to the fine details of Mary Jane's note cruelly exposes its vulgarity. Just as the boredom of Kay's conversation is translated into boredom with her as a sexual partner, just as Sarah's unimaginative, prissy vocabulary corresponds with her sexual conservatism, so Mary Jane's sloppiness with language - her flouting of grammatical conventions - is equated in Alex's imagination with her shameless sexuality. Stung into a heightened sense of linguistic decorum by this illustration of Mary Jane's illiteracy, Alex has to place the word "affair" between quotation marks, because he feels that it would otherwise convey a euphemistic air of respectability and plausibility to his relations with her. Whereas, what the discovery of this sample of her prose has made him realise, is their complete implausibility, how "unnatural" their relationship is. The unnatural sexual practices in which Alex involves himself and Mary Jane in Rome confirm, or consummate, the unnaturalness of the linguistic relationship between them. In effect, Roth seems to be offering a radical challenge to Freudian psychology by placing not sex but language at the centre of human relations, and by positing literary models as an alternative to psychoanalytical

20 The Nathan Zuckerman of *My Life as a Man* displays a similar fastidiousness over the "style" of Sharon Shatzky's pornographic letters: "If Sharon had a fault as a student of carnality, it was that she tried too hard, with the result that her prose ... offended him" (Roth 1974: 23-4).

21 From an early age, the power of words vies with that of sex for control over Alex's imagination. When he steals his sister's underwear to expedite his compulsive masturbation, he fetishises not just the physical object but its linguistic sign:

So galvanic is the effect of cotton panties against my mouth - so galvanic is the word 'panties' - that the trajectory of my ejaculation reaches startling new heights.
Later Alex is excited by

the words that furtively, at home alone, I used to look up in the dictionary just to see them there in print, the hard evidence of that most remote of all realities, words like *vulva*, and *vagina*, and *cervix*, words whose definitions will never again serve me as a source of illicit pleasure ...

(Roth 1986: 63)

The wistful tone of regret here suggests that Alex found greater satisfaction in the signifiers of female genitalia than in their referents, which may explain his impotence with Naomi. Here, for the first time, Alex encounters a girl whose linguistic resources are equal to his own. Her Marxist analysis of American bourgeois decadence - embodied, for her, in Alex - makes up for in eloquence what it lacks in originality. Having listened to her harangues, Alex promptly declares his love for her and proposes. Ignoring her expressions of incredulity, he implores her not to leave.

And again I told this girl I hardly knew, and didn't even like, how deeply in love with her I was. "Love" - oh, it makes me shudder! - "loooove," as though I could summon forth the feeling with the word.

(Roth 1986: 239)

Of course words are not feelings, nor, as philosophers from Locke to Saussure have noted, is there any inherent relation between a word and what it represents, but that still leaves unexplained the question of why Alex should be moved to try to express his love to this girl whom he doesn't even like and why he should then be unable to match his words with deeds. One explanation is that Naomi's passionate polemics have the same affect on Alex as alcohol: they increase his desire but diminish his capacity. If this is so, Alex's sexual potency is dependent on his verbal dexterity. Here he finds himself mastered rhetorically and, though he tries to reassert his dominance physically, he is unable to do so.

There is, however, inevitably, a Freudian alternative. When Alex first encounters Naomi, she reminds him of Kay Campbell, but of course, as he himself notes,

in physical type she is, of course, my mother. Coloring, size, even temperament, it turned out - a real fault-finder, a professional critic of me. Must have perfection in her men. But all this I am blind to: the resemblance between this girl and the picture of my mother in her high school yearbook is something I do not even see.

(Roth 1986: 235)

Furthermore, Alex recognises that his memory of her appearance is governed by his wish to repress this resemblance.
models of self-explanation. This project continues in Roth's novella, *The Breast*, and I would like to look briefly at this work before concluding my discussion of *Portnoy's Complaint*.

In *The Breast*, Roth turns Portnoy's fantasies of exposure and emasculation into reality. Discussing the origins of this short novel, Roth avers that "it seemed to me that if I was going to come up with anything new (in terms of my own work), it might best be done by taking this potentially hilarious situation and treating it perfectly seriously" (Roth 1985b: 74). However, the disjunction between this seriousness of tone and the inherent absurdity of the situation makes this as much a comic work as *Portnoy's Complaint*, albeit of a different sort.

The victim of a grotesque transformation which reincarnates him as a one-hundred-and-fifty-five-pound mammary gland, Professor David Alan Kepesh, languishing in hospital, desperately seeks an explanation for his condition. Where Alex turned to psychoanalysis and Freud, Kepesh turns to literature and Kafka. It is during one of the daily visits of his psychoanalyst, Dr. Klinger, that Kepesh tentatively puts forward his theory.

As he proceeds, however, Alex continues to repress this insight, so that when Naomi begins to berate him, he observes only that "she used my name as a stern teacher would, there was the thrust of admonition in it" (Roth 1986: 238). Whereas, of course, her admonitory tone resembles no one so much as his mother (whom, of course, Alex believed to be his teachers as a young child and whose "clever babbling mouth" continues to emasculate him as an adult [Roth 1986: 8]).

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23 A giant breast also features in one of the sketches in Woody Allen's film *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex but Were Too Afraid to Ask*, which appeared
"I'm grasping at straws - and I know how whimsical it seems in the circumstances. But I thought, 'I got it from fiction.' The books I've been teaching - they put the idea in my head. I'm thinking of my European Literature course. Teaching Gogol and Kafka every year - teaching 'The Nose' and 'The Metamorphosis'."

(Roth 1985c: 60)

Kepesh's apologetic tone here betrays a fear - his greatest fear throughout the book - of being laughed at, of becoming an object of public ridicule. He repeatedly seeks assurances - from Klinger, from the hospital staff, from his father, from his girlfriend - that his privacy is being maintained and persists, in spite of such assurances, in imagining himself being filmed by "T.V. cameras" or observed by "spectators up in the stands", or else that his "delirious writhings are being observed by dozens of scientists assembled in the gallery overhead" (Roth 1985c: 41, 23).

Like Alex's visions of media exposure, Kepesh's fantasies are double-edged, for although they would compromise his dignity in one sense, in another they would confer a sort of prestige, a *significance*, that Kepesh, like Alex - indeed like all Roth protagonists - craves. His refusal to accept that he is being kept in a private room, unobserved - "I may pretend otherwise, but I know they are studying me" - is as much self-fulfilling, self-sustaining desire, as it is paranoiac self-delusion (Roth 1985c: 26). Robbed of the ability to observe himself, the only way of confirming his existence to himself is by envisaging others watching him. Although he complains that "it is the silliness, the triviality, the *meaninglessness* of life that one misses most in a life like this", it is the possibility that his present existence is actually meaningless that he cannot bear to entertain (Roth 1985c: 26).

the following year. This could be mere coincidence but Allen's admiration for Roth is well-known; indeed, the character played by Allen in *Husbands and Wives* is called Gabe Roth (a compound of Gabe Wallach - the narrator/protagonist of *Letting Go* - and his creator?)
WHAT DOES IT MEAN? HOW COULD IT HAVE HAPPENED? IN THE ENTIRE HISTORY OF THE HUMAN RACE, WHY PROFESSOR KEPESH? Yes, it is clever of Dr. Klinger to keep to what is ordinary and familiar, to drone on about strength of character and the will to live. Better these banalities than the grandiose or the apocalyptic; for citadel of sanity though I may be, there is only so much that even I can take.

(Roth 1985c: 27)

Kepesh's citadel of sanity is really under siege from the very banalities that he believes (or wants us to believe) are fortifying it. The contempt for "what is ordinary and familiar" is conveyed by his use of the verb "to drone on" to describe Klinger's therapeutic patter. He cannot accept the possibility that he is simply the victim of a bizarre biological accident, he must have been singled out for a purpose, assigned a destiny, there must be an explanation for his cross-generic, cross-gender translation. Kepesh's taste in explanations leans towards "the grandiose and the apocalyptic" and his natural resource for invoking these qualities is literature. Hence his assertion that

24 Kepesh is not alone among Roth's protagonists in seeking a meaning for a physical ailment in literature. In My Life as a Man, Nathan Zuckerman, suffering from chronic headaches ever since being called into the army,

could not resist reflecting upon my migraines in the same supramedical way that I might consider the illnesses of Milly Theale or Hans Castorp or the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, or ruminate upon the transformation of Gregor Samsa into a cockroach, or search out the "meaning" in Gogol's short story of Collegiate Assessor Kovalev's temporary loss of his nose. Whereas an ordinary man might complain, "I get these damn headaches" (and have been content to leave it at that), I tended, like a student of high literature or a savage who paints his body blue, to see the migraines as standing for something, as a disclosure or "epiphany", isolated or accidental or inexplicable only to one who was blind to the design of a life or a book. What did my migraines signify?
The possibilities I came up with did not satisfy a student as "sophisticated" as myself, compared with The Magic Mountain or even "The Nose," the texture of my own story was thin to the point of transparency. It was disappointing, for instance, to find myself associating the disability that had come over me when I had begun to wear a pistol on my hip with either my adolescent terror of the physical life or some traditional Jewish abhorrence of violence - such an explanation seemed too conventional and simplistic, too "easy."

(Roth 1974: 55)
he has "Made the word flesh. I have out-Kafkaed Kafka" (Roth 1985c: 82) and his ingenius discovery of literary design in the names of his circle: "Have you realised, Doctor, that all our names begin with K, yours and mine and Kafka's? And then there is Claire - and Miss Clark!" (Roth 1985c: 70).

By imposing a pattern on his fate, Kepesh appropriates it as his own handiwork - a feat of imagination to rank with the most prodigious of literary antecedents - thereby transcending the maddening passivity of his breast-existence, "a big, brainless bag of dumb, desirable tissue, acted upon instead of acting" (Roth 1985c: 66). Adopting this strategy of measuring his life by literary yardsticks, Kepesh is able to dismiss his pre-breast period as immature dabbling, mere apprentice-work:

My life's drama, as exciting in the early years of therapy as The Brothers Karamazov, has all the appeal now of some tenth-grade reader beginning with "The Necklace" and running through to "The Luck of Roaring Camp".

(Roth 1985c: 71)

On one level, of course, this is Roth indulging in a characteristically self-reflexive literary joke, for Kepesh's story is indeed being written - is an act of artistic creation - but more importantly, Kepesh's desire to appoint himself author of his own story is a desperate, doomed attempt to escape a situation which, for all its apparent possibilities for melodrama, is unendurably, stiflingly boring. The routine of Kepesh's days as a breast (morning wash from the nurse, visit from Dr.Klinger, Claire, his father) is, his literary analogies notwithstanding, infinitely less compelling, less dramatic, than that of

In the story "Novotny's Pain", whose opening recalls the opening of "Metamorphosis" ("a young man ... awoke one morning with a pain on the right side of his body, directly above the buttock"), the protagonist "had the illusion of being tortured for a crime he had not committed" (Roth 1980: 261, 271). The Nathan Zuckerman of The Anatomy Lesson, however, struck down with a debilitating pain in the neck, "refused to make of his collar, or of the affliction it was designed to assuage, a metaphor for anything grandiose" (Roth 1984: 3).
his previous existence. It is a plot so devoid of incident, an existence so sedentary, that even Kafka and Gogol might have hesitated to use it.

The larger irony in Kepesh's insistence on Kafka and Gogol as literary forbears, or progenitors, of his bizarre incarnation as a breast, is that their stories pointedly fail to offer any explanation of their protagonists' predicament, or to attribute to them any metaphysical significance. On the contrary, they are rooted in details of the most banal kind, framed in the most quotidian of worlds.

Gregor Samsa's bedroom is "a regular human bedroom", his occupation as "a commercial traveller" an innocuous one, his family life "quiet", even the street in which he lives is simply another "quiet ... city street"; in short, his whole life is entirely unexceptional, before his metamorphosis (Kafka 1961: 9, 27, 34). The suddenness of the metamorphosis is thrust upon the reader, as it is upon Gregor himself, by its revelation in the very first sentence of the story (a sentence so startling in its use of an abrupt, matter-of-fact style to convey the most incredible of events that I had to re-read it several times when I first came across the tale, knowing nothing of Kafka): "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect" (Kafka 1961: 9).

The most obvious explanation - that Gregor is dreaming - is denied from the outset by the use of the word "awoke", a denial that is confirmed at the beginning of the second paragraph, when we are explicitly told that "It was no dream" (Kafka 1961: 9). Nor does Gregor ever seek an explanation for his tragedy; indeed his first response to his change of circumstances is a purely pragmatic one: he makes strenuous efforts to get out of bed and open the door to his room. So habitual are his thought patterns that he continues to think in terms of getting into work and apologising for his tardiness, until, having succeeded finally in emerging from his room, he confronts the petrified chief clerk (who demands "an immediate precise explanation") and offers to "put my clothes on at once, pack up my samples and start off" (Kafka 1961: 17, 21).
Even when the consequences of his alteration have had time to sink in, he is still making resolutions as though he were suffering from some minor ailment, with the imminent hope of recovery or remission: "he must lie low for the present and, by exercising patience and the utmost consideration, help the family to bear the inconvenience he was bound to cause them in his present condition" (Kafka 1961: 28).

The absurd disjunction between Gregor's decorous, euphemistic, quasi-legalistic language ("utmost consideration"; "inconvenience"; "present condition") and the sordid, horrifying reality, is grotesquely comic, and touching in its revelation of Gregor's lack of egotism. Only late in the tale does his family's neglect and revulsion elicit any resentment (when he sees the lodgers eating dinner in the living-room, he remarks "How these lodgers are stuffing themselves, and here am I dying of starvation!") but Gregor never views himself as the victim of a greater metaphysical design, nor does he ever attempt to deny the reality of his state, or see it as self-induced (Kafka 1961: 51).

Where Gregor stoically accepts his fate, Kepesh questions it, denies it (for a sustained period, he tries to convince himself that he has suffered from some sort of mental breakdown and is deluded) and rages against it. For Roth's hero, it is, above all else, the affront to his professorial dignity that his existence as a breast entails, that he resents.

"I can assure you that I am not concerned with the etiquette of being a breast," Kepesh avers in a rare moment of self-deprecating irony, and he acknowledges that "If ever there was a time to forget about propriety, decorum, and personal pride, this is it" (Roth 1985c: 23, 22). Yet his most painful moment in the book comes when his old friend and colleague, Arthur Schonbrunn, cannot contain his laughter at the sight of Kepesh as a mammoth female organ. Despite the patent absurdity of observing social niceties in his transformed state (as he remarks to Dr. Klinger, "I lie here being sensible! And there's the madness, Doctor, being sensible!") Kepesh continues to cherish and cultivate his self-image of urbanity and sophistication, as it represents his
only means of asserting a continuing humanity - of retaining a sense of self - in the face of the sensual pleasures that threaten to divest him of all remnants of his civilised identity (Roth 1985c: 41).

What alarmed me wasn't the strangeness of my desires in that hammock, but the degree to which I would be severing myself from my own past - and kind - by surrendering to them. I was afraid that the further I went, the further I would go - that I would reach a point of frenzy from which I would pass over into a state of being that no longer had anything to do with who or what I had once been. It wasn't even that I would no longer be myself - I would no longer be anyone. I would have become craving flesh and nothing more.

(Roth 1985c: 43-4)

Gregor is similarly horrified when he realises that "he had quite looked forward to having his room emptied of furnishing" (Kafka 1961: 38), because it reveals that his new-found delight in roaming over his room has supplanted any old affections for his belongings and, therefore, that he has lost all human sensibility:

Did he really want his warm room, so comfortably fitted with old family furniture, to be turned into a naked den in which he would certainly be able to crawl unhampered in all directions but at the price of shedding simultaneously all recollection of his human background?

(Kafka 1961: 38).

The answer to this rhetorical question is, of course, "yes", just as Kepesh would certainly prefer the sensation of Claire straddling his giant nipple to that of listening to his record of Olivier performing Shakespeare, but to admit these desires as legitimate would be to legitimise their new incarnations and to disown their human legacy. Instead, Gregor clings to his love of his sister's violin-playing as proof of his humanity ("Was he an animal, when music had such an effect on him?") and Kepesh asks Claire to read Shakespeare to him (Kafka 1961: 53).25

25 The difference here is that Gregor is moved in spite of himself, while Kepesh wishes to be moved in spite of himself. It is arguable which of these two states is the more painful.
Although there are times at which the futility - the comic absurdity - of retaining cultural pretensions seems overwhelming ("When I finish with Shakespeare, I can go right on to first-rate performances of Sophocles, Sheridan, Aristophanes, Shaw, Racine - but to what end?"), ultimately Kepesh's intellectual pedigree is too closely bound up with his dignity for him to relinquish them (Roth 1985c: 84). Indeed, the book finishes with a lecture, which itself concludes by quoting a poem by Rilke.

Like Kepesh, Kovalyov, the protagonist of Gogol's short story "The Nose" (whom Kepesh curiously omits from his list of names beginning with "K", despite repeatedly bracketing Gogol's story with Kafka's, as twin inspirations for his own story), relies, throughout his noseless condition, on the dignity derived from his profession to bolster his buckling sense of self. When he confronts his renegade nose in church, imploring it to return to its rightful place, he bases his appeal on his rank and social standing.

Of course, I am, as it happens, a Major. You will agree that it's not done for someone in my position to walk around minus a nose. It's alright for some old woman selling peeled oranges on the Voskresensky Bridge to go around without one. But as I'm hoping to get promoted soon ... Besides, I'm acquainted with several highly-placed ladies: Madame Chekhtaryev, for example, a state councillor's wife ...

(Gogol 1972: 49).

Whereas Kovalyov is clearly the object of Gogol's satire in a way that Kepesh is never the object of Roth's, his misplaced gravity - his comic superseriousness - is not dissimilar.

Snobbishness was a favourite target of Gogol's, a vice that he believed to be characteristic of Russians of all walks of life, as this passage from Dead Souls illustrates.

A Russian ... has a passionate desire to bolster up his own importance by striking up an acquaintance with any one who is at least one rank above him, and a
Sporting his acquaintance with Madame Chekhtaryev like a medal (a Pavlovian reflex for Kovalyov, whenever confronted with any opposition) is his way of declaring his social credentials - and thereby his right to feel peculiarly aggrieved at the loss of his nose - just as Kepesh's insistence on his intimate knowledge of Kafka, Gogol et al is his way of declaring his intellectual credentials - and thereby his right to view his fate as something more than an arbitrary freak of nature. Ignominy, for both of them, is the most acute source of their suffering and the state most devoutly to be avoided. Just as Kepesh is wounded most by the laughter of Arthur Schonbrunn, his superior at work and a man of considerable "social expertise" (Roth 1985c:49), so Kovalyov is "stung ... to the quick" when the Inspector of Police - a man of superior rank and "a great patron of the arts and industry" - looks down his (still intact) nose at him, remarking that "respectable men do not get their noses ripped off" (Gogol 1972: 57-8).

Kepesh's fear/desire of becoming a public curiosity actually happens to Kovalyov, or rather to his nose, whose regular strolls along Nevsky Avenue ensure that "Every day crowds of inquisitive people flocked there" (Gogol 1972: 66). When Kovalyov attempts to place an advertisement for the recovery of his nose, the clerk thinks that he is having his leg pulled and says to the Collegiate Assessor (Kovalyov's real rank - that of Major being a self-promotion) "you seem the cheery sort, and I can see you like to have your little joke", but so seriously does Kovalyov take himself that he cannot acknowledge the comedy of his situation (Gogol 1972: 56).

Kepesh is all too aware of the comedy intrinsic to his transsexual transformation (even before Arthur Schonbrunn's fit of hilarity), but he insists that, viewed rightly, his condition is "beyond understanding, beyond compassion, beyond comedy" (Roth 1985c: 12). This portentous (indeed one might say "grandiose or apocalyptic") mode nodding acquaintance with a count or a prince is much more important to him than the most intimate relationship with people of his own class.

(Gogol 1961: 30)
of discourse - an attempt to circumvent comedy on the part of Kepesh - itself becomes the object and source of comedy. Indeed, Kepesh's efforts to sublimate his sensuality in literary high seriousness are given an additional, retrospective comic twist in The Professor of Desire (Roth's prequel to The Breast, published five years later), in which the young Kepesh assiduously cultivates a concupiscent, atavistic self as an antidote, or counterlife, to the earnestness and propriety of his academic self. From a human sexual organ who demands to be taken seriously as an intellectual, we move (backwards in terms of Kepesh's biography) to a scholar who brings an academic rigour to his carnality: "I refuse - out of an incapacity that I elevate to a principle - to resist whatever I find irresistible ..." (Roth 1978: 22).

This example of what is a perennial juxtaposition in Roth of rarefied language and crude urges - "insist[ing], in balanced sentences, on libido," as he puts it elsewhere (Roth 1985b: 77) - is Wildean in tone (simultaneously self-important and self-mocking) and form (an epigrammatic paradox). Whereas sexuality in Wilde tends to be sublimated in the aesthetic, however, in Roth, as often as not, aestheticism is mired in the sexual. For Roth, in fact, the two are inextricably intertwined: literary seriousness is continually elevating physical desire to a principle and libido is continually debasing erudition to a comic incapacity; in Freudian terms, the pleasure principle is perpetually warring with the reality principle. It is in this sense that I believe Roth's comedy can be called "Freudian", which brings us back to Portnoy's Complaint and the relationship between Freud's own theories of comedy and Roth's.

As we saw earlier, at one point Alex accuses Freud of being a "lousy comedian". Now this might simply refer to the "joke" which Oedipus Rex becomes in Freud's hands, but I think that Alex has something else in mind. After all, he has got hold of the "Collected Papers": he is reading his way through all of Freud. Perhaps, then, his labelling Freud a "lousy comedian" refers principally not to Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex, nor to his "Contributions to the Psychology of Love", but to the work in which Freud actually tells jokes: Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious.
For Freud, jokes are pleasurable because they enable us to overcome inhibitions without the psychic expenditure of effort that this would ordinarily require. Likewise, comedy is pleasurable because someone else, with whom we empathise, has spared us the effort of remaining solemn, allowing us to shed the dignity which is ordinarily a necessary burden of adult life. In *Portnoy's Complaint*, however, the opposite seems to be the case: jokes *engender* inhibitions, comedy *imposes* a state of ignominy.

One of the main sources of comedy which Freud identifies is what he calls "the degredation of the sublime" (Freud 1976: 262):

> What is sublime is something large in the figurative, psychical sense ... when I speak of something sublime I ... try to bring the whole way in which I hold myself into harmony with the dignity of what I am having an idea of. I impose a solemn restraint upon myself ...

(Freud 1976: 261)

When "degradation" of the sublime occurs, however, one is "spared the increased expenditure of the solemn restraint" and the resulting release of tension manifests itself in laughter (Freud 1976: 262). In *Portnoy's Complaint*, Roth inverts this idea, so that Alex perceives his situation as inherently comic and, therefore, feels constrained to be frivolous, in harmony with the lack of dignity of his subject, himself.

> Doctor Spielvogel, this is my life, my only life, and I'm living it in the middle of a Jewish joke! I am the son in the Jewish joke - only it ain't no joke!

(Roth 1986: 37)

This plea is reiterated later in the novel.

> Spring me from this role I play of the smothered son in the Jewish joke! Because it's beginning to pall a little, at thirty-three! And also it *horts*, you know, there is pain involved, a little human suffering is being felt ...

(Roth 1986: 103)
In both these passages, Alex complains against being type-cast in the role of the son in the Jewish joke, and yet he does so in language that is associated with this stereotype - locutions that are highlighted through their italicisation. "Only it ain't no joke!", with its use of the double negative, and "hoits" ("hurts" pronounced with a Yiddish accent) are expressions that we might expect to find in the acts of "the Henny Youngmans and the Milton Berles" against whom Alex is protesting (Roth 1986: 104).

The point is, of course, that Alex is creating the ultimate Jewish joke even while he attempts to escape from it, and his "material" (in the comic, as well as the psychoanalytic sense) is often hilarious. Consider, for example, Alex's version of the joke about the Jewish mother emotionally blackmailing her son:

"Do you remember Seymour Schmuck, Alex?" she asks me, or Aaron Putz or Howard Schlong, or some yo-yo I am supposed to have known in grade school twenty-five years ago, and of whom I have no recollection whatsoever. "Well, I 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 split-level ranch-type houses made all of fieldstone in Livingston, and belongs to the boards of eleven synagogues, all brand new and designed by Marc Kugel, and last year with his wife and his two little daughters, who are so beautiful that they are already under contract to Metro, and so brilliant that they should be in college - he took them all to Europe for an eighty-million-dollar tour of seven thousand countries, some of them you never even heard of, that they made them just to honor Seymour, and on top of that, he's so important, Seymour, that in every single city in Europe that they visited he was asked by the mayor himself to stop and do an impossible operation on a brain in hospitals that they also built for him right on the spot, and - listen to this - where they pumped into the operating room during the operation the theme song from Exodus so that everybody should know what religion he is - and that's how big your friend Seymour is today! And how happy he makes his parents!"

(Roth 1986: 93)

This tour de force of hyperbole, with its brilliantly bathetic punchline, and its topical allusions (to the hit film Exodus, based on the best-selling novel by Leon Uris, whose sentimental distortion of history Roth criticises in Reading Myself and Others, and to other kitsch vogues) could have come straight from a routine by one of the many contemporary Jewish-American stand-up comedians, and indeed Alex is very
conscious of the sense in which his monologue is a performance - what he calls elsewhere "The Alexander Portnoy Show" (Roth 1986: 141). As ever, his distaste for his own showmanship becomes part of the show. However, the self-lacerating tendency of his humour does not remove from him the burden of being the butt of a Jewish joke - it redoubles it.

Naomi condemns Alex for his comic self-abuse, seeing it as a perverse form of self-indulgence.

"You seem to take some special pleasure, some pride, in making yourself the butt of your own peculiar sense of humor ... Everything you say is always somehow twisted, one way or another, to come out 'funny' " .

(Roth 1986: 240)

Alex defends himself, claiming that "self-deprecation is, after all, a classic form of Jewish humor" (Roth 1986: 241), which may be an admission of defeat, but at least has Freud's sanction:

A particularly favourable occasion for tendentious jokes is presented when the intended criticism is directed against the subject himself, or ... against someone in whom the subject has a share - a collective person, that is (the subject's own nation, for instance). The occurrence of self-criticism as a determinant may explain how it is that a number of the most apt jokes ... have grown up on the soil of Jewish popular life. They are stories created by Jews and directed against Jewish characteristics ... I do not know whether there are many other instances of a people making fun to such a degree of its own character.

(Freud 1976: 156-7)

Paradoxically, then, Alex's irreverence towards his Jewishness is at the same time a form of reverence (as Leslie Fiedler has pointed out, the tradition of non-conformity in Jewish culture is so entrenched as to constitute a type of conformity [Fiedler 1967: 104] ). His attempts to free himself from the confines of his comical identity become expressions of it. As his plane for Israel takes off, Alex implicitly acknowledges this double bind, attacking himself for attacking himself: "How have I come to be such an enemy and flayer of myself? ... Nothing but self! Locked up in me!" (Roth 1986: 226).
Alex abuses himself verbally for the same reason as he abuses himself physically: in the hope of forcing his way out of the comic prison that is his self - hence his reference to his penis as his "battered battering ram to freedom" (Roth 1986: 34). Yet, as the pun here illustrates, Alex's jokes do not liberate him from himself; rather they chain him to it with guilt-edged manacles.

On his way back from the burlesque house, where he has masturbated into his baseball mitt, Alex begins

chastising myself ruthlessly, moaning aloud, 'Oh no, no,' not unlike a man who has just felt his sole skid through a pile of dog turds - sole of his shoe, but take the pun, who cares, who cares ...

(Roth 1986: 122)

Here again, sexual guilt is not expiated through a joke that releases tension; it is redoubled by the pun, a pun so self-consciously made that Alex actually alerts us explicitly to its existence. Guilt as a comical idea, we should remember, was, according to Roth, the key to the composition of the novel, and indeed Alex exclaims at one point: "Any guilt on my part is comical!" (Roth 1986: 227). Yet for Alex this recognition is not the breakthrough that it was for Roth, for Alex does not want his guilt to be comical, his shame to be a punchline. Like Kepesh, he craves a suffering that is "Dignified" and "Meaningful" - the ennobling pain of tragedy, rather than a

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27 In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud draws a hierarchical distinction between puns and plays on words. Puns, he says, make the least demand on the technique of expression, just as the play upon words proper makes the highest. While in the latter the two meanings should find their expression in identically the same word, which on that account is usually said only once, it is enough for a pun if the two words expressing the two meanings recall each other by some vague similarity ...

(Freud 1976: 80)

The repetition of "sole" here - the second mention of the word invoking the identically-sounding word "soul" - may be a sly allusion on Roth's part to this passage.
comedy that "hoists" (Roth 1986: 229).

Seen in this light, his self-ridicule is a defense against the fear that his whole life is a joke, that he inhabits "a world given its meaning by some vulgar nightclub clown," a pre-emptive comic strike intended to disarm the barbed comments of others (Roth 1986: 104). However, there is another possible explanation for Alex's fondness for jokes that compromise his dignity, in particular for scatalogical jokes. This is what Freud has to say about the motives for telling jokes:

The motive force for the production of innocent jokes is not infrequently an ambitious urge to show one's cleverness, to display oneself - an instinct that may be equated with exhibitionism in the sexual field. The presence of numerous inhibited instincts, whose suppression has retained a certain degree of instability, will provide the most favorable disposition for tendentious jokes. Thus individual components of a person's sexual constitution, in particular, can appear as motives for the construction of a joke. A whole class of obscene jokes allows one to infer the presence of a concealed inclination to exhibitionism in their inventors ...

(Freud 1976: 194)

We know all about Alex's "concealed inclination towards exhibitionism" and the relationship between the self-revelation of confession and the self-revelation of sexual exhibitionism is an intimate one. In his discussion of the comic, moreover, Freud attributes another function to the preoccupation with bodily functions which seems relevant here.

Under the heading of 'unmasking' we may also include ... the method of degrading the dignity of individuals by directing attention to ... the dependence of their mental functions on their bodily needs.

(Freud 1976: 263)

It is precisely this comic "unmasking" of the subordination of his mental functions to his bodily needs that Alex continually anticipates (and that manifests itself symbolically in Kepesh's transformation). Defending his reluctance to acknowledge publicly his relationship with Mary Jane, Alex offers this explanation:
Take her fully for my own, you see, and the whole neighborhood will at last know the truth about my dirty little mind. The so-called genius will be revealed in all his piggish proclivities and filthy desires. The bathroom door will swing open (unlocked!), and behold, there sits the savior of mankind, drool running down his chin, absolutely ga-ga in the eyes, and his prick firing salvos at the light bulb! A laughingstock, at last!

(Roth 1986: 184)

This passage professes to represent Alex's worst nightmare, and yet the pun on "filthy," the change in tense from the future - "The bathroom door will swing open" - to the present - "there sits the savior of mankind," and the exuberant hyperbole - "his prick firing salvos at the light bulb" - all tend to suggest that Alex longs to be exposed - to expose himself - as a slave to carnal desire. Indeed, the final sentence "A laughingstock, at last!" suggests the attainment of a long-cherished goal rather than the fulfilment of an abhorred projection. Still, however, what makes this passage funny is not so much the degradation of Alex's dignity, as the inflated view that he has of his own status, the seriousness with which Alex speaks of "the whole neighbourhood" witnessing the debunking of the local "genius". In an interview with the editors of Reading Philip Roth, Roth observes that Zuckerman's comic predicament results from the repeated attempt to escape his comic predicament. Comedy is what Zuckerman is bound by - what's laughable is his insatiable desire to be a serious man taken seriously ... his superseriousness is what the comedy's about.

(Roth 1988b in Milbauer & Watson 1988: 9)

Like Zuckerman, Portnoy and Kepesh are bound by comedy; like Zuckerman, their attempts to escape his comic predicament are themselves comical; like Zuckerman, they have a tendency to become superserious. However, these remarks seem to me even more applicable to some of Bellow's heroes than to Roth's.
Four Superior Solemn Buffoons: Comedy as Alibi in Saul Bellow

Like Roth, Bellow takes his comedy very seriously and equates his discovery of the genre with the discovery of his own fictional voice. Like Roth, Bellow's first two novels were highly serious and highly imitative, "straight and respectable" (Bellow 1994: 317). Claustrophobic in atmosphere and meticulous in construction, Dangling Man and The Victim owed heavy debts to Notes From the Underground and The Eternal Husband respectively, and were characterised by what Bellow calls "the solemnity of complaint" (Bellow 1966b: 62). With the publication of his third novel, however, the "painful satisfaction of restraint" - to use Herzog's phrase - gave way to a more expansive, discursive, effusive narrative style (Bellow 1965a: 20). Bellow's description of the process by which this change came about resembles Roth's in its imagery of self-emancipation. Bellow speaks of "the relief of turning away from mandarin English and putting my own accents into the language", of breaking a "stranglehold" of "depression" by writing with "reckless spontaneity", and of overcoming the inhibitions of the young writer anxious to please the literary establishment (Bellow 1994: 317-18):

when I wrote those early books I was timid ... I had to touch a great many bases, demonstrate my abilities, pay my respects to formal requirements. In short, I was afraid to let myself go.

... [in writing Augie March] I took off many of those restraints. I think I took off too many, and went too far, but I was feeling the excitement of discovery. I had just increased my freedom, and like any emancipated plebeian I abused it at once [my italics].

(Bellow 1966b: 55)

Bellow's language here echoes that of Augie himself - who speaks of having "touched all sides" (Bellow 1954a: 113) in an effort to please everyone and who casts himself in the role of a latter-day Columbus - but of course Augie's voyage of self-discovery is no more Bellow's than Portnoy's analysis is Roth's. Moreover, Bellow hints here that the style of Augie March was too undisciplined, too diffuse and
elsewhere he concedes that he "had to tame and restrain the style I developed in Augie March to write Henderson and Herzog" (Bellow 1966b: 57). This does not amount to a recantation, however; comedy retains its ascendancy in the perennial struggle with solemnity: "Obliged to choose between complaint and comedy, I choose comedy, as more energetic, wiser and manlier ... Herzog makes comic use of complaint" (Bellow 1966b: 62). That Bellow sees himself as a comic writer is clear, then, but what exactly he understands by the term - what type of comedy it is that he practises - is less clear.

Critics offer little illumination on this point. Most agree that he is a comic novelist, but there is less consensus on the nature of his comedy. Earl Rovit calls it "the modern comedy of identity" (Rovit in Malin 1969: 180); Harold Bloom sees it as "anti-modernist comedy" (Bloom 1986: 5); Cynthia Ozick and Malcom Bradbury characterise it as "metaphysical" (Ozick in Bloom 1986: 236; Bradbury 1982: 104), but none of them define these terms very clearly. Some critics do acknowledge that Bellow's comedy is problematic. Trachtenberg, in his introduction to a collection of essays on Bellow, notes that "Bellow's comedy is evasive, turning finally to parody its inclusive tendency" and that "it is often difficult to determine who or what is the object of its laughter and where responsibility lies for the comic vulnerability it exposes" (Trachtenberg 1979: xx, xii). Dolly Smith, who labels Bellow's comedy "Sublime", argues that it is fundamentally anti-intellectual in intention and yet only appeals to intellectuals (Smith 1988: 7). Sarah Blacher Cohen recognises that the nature of Bellow's laughter is enigmatic, but seems finally to locate it in the tradition of incongruity. She finds in Bellow's novels "the risible coexistence of polished English and fractured English, reputable euphemism and their disreputable four-letter equivalents, ostentatious diction and unassuming diction, philosophical obscurity and gutter clarity" (Blacher Cohen 1974: 19). For Blacher Cohen, Bellow's comedy derives from the yoking of respectability and refinement with irreverence and vulgarity or, in Roth's terms, from the clash of sensibilities of the paleface and the redskin that produces the redface.
Bellow and Roth may be fellow redfaces, but their comedy is very different, in spite of the similarities in the way that they write about it. If, as Bellow suggests, "Herzog makes comic use of complaint", Herzog's complaints are nothing like Portnoy's. Perhaps the more informative comparison, indeed, is between Portnoy's Complaint and Bellow's own exploration of the relationship between psychoanalysis and comedy, The Last Analysis.  

One of only three Bellow plays, and the only one to have enjoyed a brief run on Broadway, The Last Analysis centres on Philip Bummidge (known to friends and fans as "Bummy"), a stand-up comedian turned psychoanalyst, who is described in the Dramatis Personae as being "Half ravaged, half dignified, earnest when he is clowning and clowning when he means to be earnest" (Bellow 1966a: ix). In his heyday "the greatest comedian of his time", Bummidge has long since renounced the stage for the couch, developing his own brand of "home-brewed psychoanalysis" ("Existenz-Action-Self-Analysis") with which he hopes to gain the recognition of his peers (Bellow 1966a: 4). In a private broadcast to be screened live from his apartment to an audience of eminent members of the American Psychiatric Association, Bummidge intends to establish the "universal significance" of his "research" (Bellow 1966a: 7). The play follows his frantic preparations as the hour of the broadcast approaches and members of his family attempt to dissuade and distract him from his project, and concludes - after the chaotic but triumphant broadcast has taken place - with Bummidge rejecting

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28 For an interesting comparison between Portnoy's Complaint and Herzog, see Tony Tanner's essay "Fictionalised Recall - or 'The Settling of Scores! The Pursuit of Dreams!' in City of Words (Tanner 1976: 295-322); for an examination of Bellow's use of Freud (primarily in Herzog) see Daniel Fuchs's essay "Bellow and Freud" (Fuchs 1984b in Bloom 1988: 73-94).

29 In 1964, at the Belasco Theatre, in a version quite different from the revised version (published two years later - three years before Portnoy's Complaint) which I shall be using. The cool reception of the play clearly caused Bellow to rethink radically, and this version, in his words, "makes use of some of the timbers of that shipwreck, but much of it is entirely new" (Bellow 1966a: vii).
lucrative offers to return to the stage and dismissing everyone but his closest associates.

In an "Author's Note" that prefaces the revised version of the play, Bellow observes that

_The Last Analysis_ is not simply a spoof of Freudian psychology ... Its real subject is the mind's comical struggle for survival in an environment of Ideas ... In _The Last Analysis_ a clown is driven to thought, and ... turns into a theoretician. I have always had a weakness for autodidacts ... and enjoy observing the democratic diffusion of high culture.

(Bellow 1966a: vii-iii)

If the play is not simply a spoof of Freudian psychology, a spoof it most certainly is. Desperate to raise five thousand dollars to pay off his old friend Louie Mott for arranging the broadcast, Bummidge asks his cousin Winkleman for the money, whereupon Winkleman reproaches him for having squandered all his wealth.

BUMMIDGE: Don't you know what Freud says about gold? What does the color remind you of?

WINKLEMAN: Try giving Louie here - _gestures_ - the other substance. See if he'll take it.

(Bellow 1966a: 8)

This debunking of Freud is typical of the play, both in the way in which it highlights the disjunction between Freud's abstract theories and concrete realities, and in its implied swipe at the hypocritical refusal of psychoanalysis to acknowledge its

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30 This "weakness", which is evident throughout his work (many of his heroes are autodidacts), seems to derive from Bellow's own experience. In the preface to _It All Adds Up_, he describes himself as "a most persistent self-educator" (Bellow 1994: xiii) and in one of the essays in that collection he claims to have used books "like a dope addict" (Bellow 1994: 310), a simile which recalls Winkelman's remarks on Bummidge:

This man hid books in his dressing room ... Booksellers were like dope-pushers to him. He was like a junkie - on thought.

(Bellow 1966a: 10)
own materialist basis. At the end of a session of self-analysis, in which Bummidge has
a conversation with himself, continually switching between the roles of patient and
analyst, he unlocks a valise stuffed full of money and, in his guise as the patient, places
twenty dollars on the "analyst's" chair, explaining that "This is one point on which I
can't break with orthodox Freudianism. You must pay the analyst" (Bellow
1966a: 29). Moreover, Bummidge later explicitly criticises the élitism of current
psychoanalytic practice, claiming that "The couch is for people with higher income
brackets" (Bellow 1966a: 54).

This is an uncharacteristic moment, however; for the most part, the "spoof" of
Freudian psychology takes the form of a series of reductive cod-versions of Freudian
ideas. For example, when Pamela, Bummidge's lover, tells him that his stomach is
rumbling, he corrects her: "It isn't rumbling. It's doing free association" (Bellow
1966a: 46). Or when Bummidge attempts to analyse one of his dreams, in which a fat
man appears.

But was this fat man a man? In the unconscious to be obese is to be female. Oh,
that unconscious, is it ever cunning! Repression! The power of the Id! This was
a male with breasts.

(Bellow 1966a: 12)

Bellow demystifies Freud by emphasising the ways in which the high culture of
Freud's original writing undergoes democratic diffusion. Madge, Bummidge's sister,
claims that Freud is "passé" and "old hat", while Bummidge apostrophises his statue of
Freud at one moment - "O master, how deep you were!" - and vows at the next to
"revise Freud some more - respectfully" (Bellow 1966a: 18, 24, 48, 112). Like
Portnoy, Bummidge vacillates between the conviction that he exemplifies all Freud's
theories - that he suffers from all the common neuroses - and the suspicion that the
theories themselves are neurotic - that, as Bellow put it in his Nobel Lecture, "the
psychoanalytic conception of character ... is an ugly, rigid formation" (Bellow
1994: 90). At one point Bummidge exclaims "This psyche of mine is an outlaw. Can
this be the normal human state?" and in his role as his own patient he complains of being "fed up with these boring figures in my unconscious. It's always Father, Mother" (Bellow 1966a: 73, 26). Just as in Portnoy's Complaint, this general critique of psychoanalysis is accompanied by a more specific critique of Freud's theories of comedy.

Bummidge's assistant, Bertram - a former rat-catcher - explains how he became involved with his mentor's project.

He showed me that to go around killing rats meant I must be compulsive, obsessional. The rat often symbolizes the child, as in the "Pied Piper". The rat also stands for a primordial mystery. Earth mystery. Chthonic. But most of all, my sense of humor fascinated Bummy. I don't laugh at jokes.

(Bellow 1966a: 38)

Whereas Freud was a psychoanalyst with an interest in comedy, Bummidge is a comedian with an interest in psychoanalysis (so that when Max asks "What makes a comic think he can cure human perversity?" [Bellow 1966a: 34], we might ask "What makes a psychoanalyst think he can explain how comedy works?"). Bummidge alludes directly to Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious only once, when his aunt (and midwife) Velma starts to tell jokes about his childhood on air. Bummidge turns to the camera and explains: "An old gag. She's full of them. They're really sadistic threats in comic form" (Bellow 1966a: 76). However, his preoccupation with comic theory is evident throughout the play. As Bella points out, "one man's jokes are another man's theories" and in Bummidge's case the jokes are the theories (Bellow 1966a: 55).

Towards the end of the play he begins to dictate notes to Imogen, his secretary, one of which concerns Aristotle's views on comedy:

"They say that tragedy makes us look better and comedy worse than we are. But that is puzzling. In the first place, what are we? And in the second place, what is worse?"

(Bellow 1966a: 115)
It is the first of these questions that is crucial, because for Bummidge, as for Bellow, the question of what we are, or rather who we are, is intimately bound up with the question of what modern comedy is. Bummidge claims that his expertise in comedy gives him the edge over his psychoanalytic colleagues. When Bella warns him not to "tell those intellectuals what they already know ... They'll laugh at you", he responds "They know nothing about laughing. That's my field" and later he refers to himself as "an artist whose sphere is comedy" (Bellow 1966a: 53, 74). Yet Bummidge's experience seems to suggest that the process of psychoanalysis is fundamentally inimical to comedy. Recalling his childhood development, Bummidge decides that, as a result of his father's disapproval, he "split up into fragments":

My self got lost. But where is the me that is me? What happened to it? Rises slowly. That was the beginning of my comic method.

*Explaining the matter to himself, he goes.*

(Bellow 1966a: 41)

When his self was lost, dispersed, blurred in outline, comedy came easily to Bummidge; now that he has reconstructed that self, redrawn its boundaries, explained his self to himself, he "no longer know[s] what laughter is" (Bellow 1966a: 12). Whereas psychoanalysis seeks to reconcile the warring factions of the self, to create a unified whole, comedy exploits their dissension, promotes the disintegration of the self. Bummidge's dream is to attempt a synthesis between comedy and psychoanalysis, but as Winkleman points out, this is a project akin to the building of the Tower of Babel (Bellow 1966a: 36). Indeed, Winkleman's analogy is acute, because the very thing that foils Babel's architects is also responsible for the failure of Bummidge's project - the incompatibility of different languages.

Among the select audience invited to watch Bummidge's broadcast are
not only psychologists and analysts, but artists, too, and comedians. I want the comedians to see how the analysts laugh. I want the analysts to see how seriously the comedians take me.

(Bellow 1966a: 15)

Bummidge hopes, through his broadcast, to explain his two selves to each other, to achieve a synthesis between the discourses of psychoanalysis and comedy. But, as Freud discovered, this is a forlorn hope. During the broadcast Bummidge speculates that

each man rejects himself, denies what he is, and doesn't even know it. He laughs. He pushes the others and forces them to laugh with him. Isn't that funny?

(Bellow 1966a: 85)

The point here is that Bummidge has rejected himself, and it isn't funny. Bummidge wants his jokes to be theoretical, but instead his theories are jokes - he is, in Winkleman's words, a "solemn buffoon", or, to adapt Bellow's own label for modern critics, a "superserious theorist" (Bellow 1966a: 8; Bellow 1994: 162). Like Portnoy, Bummidge's attempt to escape from his role as a comic figure is self-defeating. There is, however, a crucial difference between Bummidge's superseriousness and Portnoy's, between The Last Analysis and Portnoy's Complaint, between Bellow's comedy and Roth's.

When his sister Madge shows him her torn slip to convince him of her state of penury, Bummidge fingers it and then bursts out:


(Bellow 1966a: 17)

What his unconscious is trying to tell him, it turns out, is that at the age of eleven he was surprised by his sister while fumbling through the underwear in her dresser. Bummidge persuades Madge to help him re-enact the trauma and then subjects the
memory to a sub-Freudian analysis.

BUMMIDGE: A petticoat. Lace. Hem. I was hemmed in. A boy's awakening sex cruelly suppressed. A drawer. Drawer - coffin - death. Poor things that we are. Binding with briars the joys and desires. Madge, you see how I work?

MADGE - matronly composure beginning to return: Ridiculous!


BUMMIDGE - turns to him: Can you tell me what a joke is?

(Bellow 1966a: 20)

Now much of this seems to anticipate Portnoy's Complaint: the reductive Freudian analysis, which becomes a joke, which then prompts the inquiry into the nature of jokes; even the scenario of the young boy seeking sexual excitement from his sister's clothing, and the response of the mother, who (as played by Madge) "swipes at him with a broom" (Bellow 1966a: 20). However, the difference is that the material which is funny in Roth's novel just isn't funny in Bellow's play, and this causes a problem. Despite Bellow's assertion that the reaction of "the cold and peevish first-night audience" to the play proved "of the greatest value to me", the rancour of the description suggests a less sanguine response (Bellow 1966a: vii). Bellow attributes their lack of enthusiasm to the fact that "the Broadway version neglected the mental comedy of Bummidge and his family", but it seems more likely to me that they were confused and irritated by a play that appears to be a comedy - and keeps drawing attention to its own jokes - but does not feel like one (Bellow 1966a: viii).^{32}

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^{31} Like Roth, Bellow puns on the word, using it in its comic and psychoanalytic senses, when he has Bummidge say, in response to his estranged wife Bella's recriminations, "This is very rich material" (Bellow 1966a: 83).

^{32} Irving Malin's comments on Bellow's remarks seem pertinent:
This gap between intention and execution - between the way in which the work presents and explains itself, and the way in which it is received by its audience - is one that characterises much of Bellow's comedy.

In a tribute to William Arrowsmith, Bellow wrote that

He was ... highly assertive and obstinate in his opinions but very open to comic suggestion and capable of laughing at himself - a trait I value highly.

(Bellow 1994: 281)

Yet this is a trait that Bellow's fictional characters seem to lack. Although Portnoy desperately wants to be taken seriously, he is the first to see the comedy of this desire - he wants his audience to stop laughing at him, but he cannot help laughing at himself. Bummidge, on the other hand, is incapable of directing his comedy at himself and tries instead to force his audience to laugh at his own wit. In this he is typical of a number of Bellow's heroes.

Early on in Herzog, we are told that the eponymous hero "enjoyed a joke on himself" (Bellow 1965a: 23). This suggestion that Herzog has a propensity for noting his own absurdity - for self-satire - is reiterated several times in the novel, through phrases such as "A momentary light of self-humor passed over his face" and "He too could smile at Herzog and despise him" (Bellow 1965a: 49, 23). Do these representations of a comic sensibility correspond to the reality, however? How often do we actually see Herzog laughing at himself, as opposed to being told that he likes to do so? Not very often. On the contrary, our abiding impression is of a man who takes himself very seriously, who tends to aggrandise rather than mock himself. Even when the narrator (who may be Herzog himself - the vacillation between first and third-

Bellow is introducing here in a didactic, pedagogical manner a play that, according to him, attacks all theoreticians. Is he joking? Does he want us to extend our awareness of the comedy to include his own "sins"?

(Malin 1975 in Rovit 1975: 115)
person is so frequent that it is virtually impossible to distinguish the two voices) admits this failing, he quickly adds a qualification that vindicates Herzog's judgment: "Herzog had a weakness for grandeur, and even bogus grandeur (was it ever entirely bogus?)" (Bellow 1965a: 61).

Bellow's claim to have toned down the excesses of *Augie March* in *Herzog* is not without substance, however, for if there is an uncomfortable discrepancy in the latter between the hero's self-advertisement as a comic self-deprecator and the self-enobling thrust of his narrative, in the former there is a violent disjunction. Augie thinks of himself as a great comedian, an "animal ridens", a "laughing creature" and indeed he is routinely lauded for his sense of humour by critics (Bellow 1965a: 536).  

I wish to consider Augie alongside two later Bellow heroes - of short stories - whose comic sense is similarly self-trumpeted, to show that his status as a comedian is far more ambiguous than such critics would allow.

Like Augie, Dr. Mosby, the hero of "Mosby's Memoirs", "thought he did have an eye for certain kinds of comedy" (Bellow 1969: 163) while Dr. Shawmut, the hero of "Him with His Foot in His Mouth", is prone to fits of "laughing border[ing] on hysteria" (Bellow 1984: 9). Both men, like Augie, are reviewing their lives, in exile; seeking to explain, extenuate and exorcise their past selves. Mosby, who has

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33 Amongst the initial reviewers of the novel, Delmore Schwartz attributes to Augie "an attitude of satirical acceptance ... the comic transcendence of affirmation and rejection" (Schwartz 1954 in Trachtenberg 1979: 9) and Robert Penn Warren calls him "a seeker and hoper aware of the comedy of seeking and hoping" (Warren 1953 in Trachtenberg 1979: 22). This line is endorsed by many later critics, including Gerald Jay Goldberg - who sees Augie as an heir to the ineffably good-humoured Tom Jones, in his essay "Life's Customer, Augie March" (Goldberg 1960: 23-5) - and David D. Galloway, who calls him a "philosophical clown" and compares him to Yossarian, with whom he shares "a kind of comic invulnerability" (Galloway 1965: 52). There are dissenting voices, however, notably Sarah Blacher Cohen, who identifies a "forced verbal effervescence" masquerading as comic ebullience (Cohen 1974: 215); Leslie Fiedler, who detects a note of "fake euphoria" in Augie's voice (Fiedler 1977: 114), and Judie Newman, who finds a "growing cynicism" in the narrative (Newman 1984: 53).
committed "some of the most interesting mistakes a man could make in the twentieth century" is in Mexico, on a Guggenheim grant, to write his memoirs (Bellow 1969: 157). Bellow's story finds Mosby pausing in his work, feeling that

The time had come to put some humor into the memoirs ... thousands of students and others would tell you, "Mosby had a great sense of humor".

(Bellow 1969: 158)

To display his wit to advantage, Mosby recalls the story of Hymen Lustgarten, a revolutionary manqué, and small-time black-marketeer (shades of Augie), beneath whose efficient manner "a traitorous incompetence trembled within" (Bellow 1969: 164). At first, it appears that Lustgarten is simply an incidental figure of fun: "His conversation amused me ... He was proud of his revolutionary activities, which consisted mainly of cranking the mimeograph machine" (Bellow 1969: 164). Later on, however, we discover that Mosby has had an affair with Lustgarten's wife, Trudy, and that he had arranged for her to be seen with another man in order to deflect suspicion from himself. Worse still, he is responsible for her decision to leave Lustgarten, for he had, albeit unwittingly, instilled in her the same contempt for her husband that he felt: "his vision of Lustgarten as a funny man had been transmitted to Trudy. She could not be the wife of such a funny man" (Bellow 1969: 182). Here we have the two sides of being a "funny man" juxtaposed: Mosby is (in his own eyes) wittily, wittingly funny and therefore commands respect; Lustgarten is stupidly, unwittingly funny, the butt of Mosby's humour, and therefore ridiculous and contemptible. Mosby's comedy is the comedy of superiority, the comedy of self-congratulation, the comedy that exults in the deformities and misfortunes of others as a consolation for one's own disappointments.

Shawmut, the narrator of "Him with His Foot in His Mouth", is also writing (but not quite righting) wrongs. In his case, a casual insult made as a young man (thirty-five years previously) provides the pretext for an excavation of his past, in the guise of a letter of apology to the injured party. Awaiting extradition in British Columbia for
financial transgressions initiated by his unscrupulous, opportunist brother (who bears
more than a passing resemblance to Augie's brother, Simon, while lacking his resilience
and charm), Shawmut is overtaken by a desire to settle his personal accounts. His
crime, too, we are given to understand, derived from a temperamental inclination to
ridicule: when possessed by the urge to make a cutting remark, "I always lose control
and I am ... a hostage to my tongue" (Bellow 1984: 23).

Shawmut's victim in this instance was Miss Rose, a spinster librarian who,
observing the young Shawmut sporting a baseball cap, remarks "Oh, Dr. Shawmut, in
that cap you look like an archaeologist." Shawmut replies "And you look like
something I just dug up" (Bellow 1984: 8). Shawmut's stated motive for writing his
letter is penitential, just as Mosby hopes that his inclusion of the Lustgarten story in his
memoirs will facilitate "The correction of pride by laughter" (Bellow 1969: 177). In
reality, however, Mosby's pride is confirmed by his narrative treatment of Lustgarten,
while Shawmut's callous indiscretion is compounded by his letter.

Shawmut claims to view himself as an innately comic figure ("I am a high-
waisted and long-legged man, who is susceptible to paradoxical, ludicrous images of
himself"), yet throughout his narration his sense of himself as a serious intellect is
pervasive (Bellow 1984: 7). The letter is really a self-addressed epistle, and it is not so
much a retraction or confession of misdeeds, as a celebration of, and encomium on, his
own wit. Near the end of the letter, Shawmut reveals that, "Wandering about
Vancouver this summer, I have considered whether to edit an anthology of sharp
sayings. Make my fate pay off. But I am too demoralized to do it" (Bellow 1984: 57).
Yet that is effectively what he has done in the letter. That, and bemoan the "fate" that
has befallen him in old age: "It isn't easy to write with arthritic fingers" (Bellow
1984: 9). Only a tiny proportion of the letter has any direct bearing on Miss Rose - a
fact of which Shawmut is residually aware, to judge by the frequency of comments
such as "Please forgive this, Miss Rose. It seems to me that we will need the broadest
possible human background for this inquiry, which may so much affect your emotions
and mine" and "We need to get closer to the subject. I have to apologise to you, but there is also a mystery here ... that cries out for investigation" (Bellow 1984: 13, 23-4).

The quasi-scientific tone of these apologetic asides ("inquiry"; "investigation" etc.) illustrates just how seriously Shawmut takes himself, how serious an object of inquiry he believes himself to be. His pretence of intellectual humility ("It made me scream with laughter to be called 'Dr. Shawmut' ") is given the lie by his obvious pride in his celebrity status (Bellow 1984: 7). He breaks off from informing Miss Rose that his "specialty" at college was music history to say:

As if this were news to you; my book on Pergolesi is in all libraries. Impossible that you shouldn't have come across it. Besides, I've done those musicology programs on public television, which were quite popular.

(Bellow 1984: 6).

The nod towards humility here ("quite popular") only reinforces the overriding sense of vanity. Similarly, he concludes his diatribe against his old contemporary Eddie Walish (who reminds Shawmut of his remark to Miss Rose in the course of a long letter, full of college reminiscences, that Shawmut reads as a personal attack) by observing that "My success in musicology may have been too much for him" (Bellow 1984: 10).

Mosby likewise prides himself on his intellectual achievements and feels ill-treated by fate, the victim of conspiracies and vendettas fuelled by jealousy.

He had expected a high post-war appointment, for which, as director of counter-espionage in Latin America, he was ideally qualified. But Dean Acheson personally disliked him. Nor did Dulles approve. Mosby, a fanatic about ideas, displeased the institutional gentry.

(Bellow 1969: 159-60).

Like Shawmut, who makes much of his social outsiderdom at college ("Fresh from Chicago ... I had never seen birches, roadside ferns, deep pinewoods, little white steeples. What could I be but out of place?"), Mosby casts himself in the role of the
rebel, the upstart, whose precocious talents and radical views frighten the establishment (Bellow 1984: 6-7). Mosby's narrative is written in the third person - "Mosby speaking of himself in the third person as Henry Adams had done in The Education of Henry Adams" (Bellow 1969: 165) - but he reserves clinical detachment for his evaluation of others. The third person is used not to expose, but to conceal; not to strip away self-importance, but to confer dignity. Dignity is Mosby's watchword: even when in fear for his life, gasping for air in the underground vault of an old church, he finds time, before fleeing back above ground, to bid a decorous farewell to his fellow tourists: "Ladies, I find it very hard to breathe" (Bellow 1969: 184).

He finds Lustgarten's efforts at projecting a dignified persona absurd, however, musing that "a man like Lustgarten would never, except with supernatural aid, exist in a suitable form" [my italics] (Bellow 1969: 175). For Mosby, a human being is either suitable or unsuitable, either necessary or superfluous. Because Lustgarten's existence serves no obvious purpose in Mosby's system of values, he becomes a figure of fun, an anachronism, an item with no currency: "Poorly imagined, unoriginal, the rerun of old ideas [my italics] and so inefficient. Lustgarten didn't have to happen. And so he was funny" (Bellow 1969: 183).

Mosby (whose fanaticism about ideas alienates him from the prosaic politicians) is offended most by Lustgarten's intellectual recidivism: Lustgarten is redundant, an outdated model of humanity. The imagery here - of man engineered according to a specific design or blueprint - recurs when Mosby comes to consider himself for the final time:

also a separate creation, a finished product ... he was complete. He had completed himself in this cogitating, unlaughing, stone, iron, nonsensical form [my italics].

(Bellow 1969: 184)

At the end of his story (and also of his life? whether Mosby escapes from the tomb at the end is not clear, but his death is clearly imminent, his life "complete"), Mosby recognises his own absurdity and associates it with his solemnity: to be
"unlaughing" in your cogitations is to be "nonsensical"; to take yourself seriously is to construct a fixed, immutable, sovereign self. Mosby has triumphed in his comical struggle for survival in a world of ideas, but only by deleting comedy from the equation - by taking the ideas entirely seriously. Mosby's is a pyrrhic victory: he has constructed a self that he can explain, but the explanation is nonsensical, because the self it describes is complete, solid, univocal: exempt from comedy. What might have been a humbling moment of self-revelation is vitiated by Mosby's characteristic abrogation of God-like powers (he is self-created). Even in the act of self-criticism, Mosby testifies to his own autonomy. Like many of Bellow's heroes, his compulsive introspection and acute self-consciousness (of which the writing of one's memoirs is perhaps the ultimate manifestation) derives as much from self-satisfaction as from the impulse to re-evaluate his personal worth.

Shawmut, at the end of his self-regarding narrative, renounces his life of "monkey business", claiming to be "ready to listen to words of ultimate seriousness" (Bellow 1984: 59). He believes that his letter has led him to make "important discoveries about myself" and resulted in a "communion" (Bellow 1984: 57). Yet these "discoveries" proceed from and themselves display Shawmut's abiding self-deception and compulsive sophistry. In what sense has there been a "communion"? Not with Miss Rose, to whom the letter has not yet been sent (let alone elicited a response) and who will, in any case, receive an edited, bowdlerised version: Shawmut writes, "I will say it all and revise, send Miss Rose only the suitable parts" (Bellow 1984: 4). Nor has there been any self-communion, for Shawmut ends his letter as spiritually impoverished - as self-ignorant and self-satisfied - as he is when he starts it.

Shawmut acknowledges that "Where there are musical questions, I always try to answer them earnestly. People have told me that I am comically woodenheaded in this respect, a straight man" (Bellow 1984: 55) because he is quite happy to be seen as the straight man whose seriousness is an index of his academic authority (better this than to be seen as the "funny man" in the sense that Lustgarten is in "Mosby's Memoirs").
However, he fails to recognise the essential truth about himself that this reveals: that in matters touching himself, his dignity, his self-image (to which his musical expertise is essential), he is always "comically woodenheaded", always "the straight man". His problem is not, as he likes to think, that he cannot restrain his "mischievous impulses" - contain his comic excesses - but rather that he has no sense of humour at all (Bellow 1984: 59). His putdowns are not so much manifestations of irrepressible wit as attempts to assert his own dignity at the expense of others'. Shawmut's laughter is of the Hobbesian sort: an assertion of the superiority of the self through the degradation of the other. Miss Rose's crime was to make a flippant remark, to fail to take Shawmut entirely seriously. Shawmut's guilt lies not only in making his cruel riposte, but in seeking to explain himself in terms that render him the victim of a metaphysical curse.

I never intentionally insulted anyone. I sometimes think that I don't have to say a word for people to be insulted by me, that my existence itself insults them. ... In various ways I have been trying to say this to you, using words like seizure, rapture, demonic possession, frenzy, Fatum, divine madness, or even solar storm - on a microcosmic scale. (Bellow 1984: 56-7).

In fact, Shawmut's jokes are entirely deliberate and their impropriety merely accentuates the pleasure that he takes in them, in the way that Hazlitt describes: what we have here (to adapt Coleridge's judgement on Iago's second soliloquy) is the explanation-hunting of an inexplicable malignity (as well as an ostentatious display of learning). Like Shakespeare's villain, Shawmut will adduce any number of reasons for his behaviour other than his own petty-minded gall. Unlike Iago, however, who recognises the ultimate responsibility of the individual for his own actions (" 'tis in ourselves, that we are thus, or thus. Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners"), Shawmut prefers to see himself as the victim of circumstances beyond his control (Othello: I iii 319-21).

Augie, similarly, fastens on a conveniently deterministic attitude to explain the
course of his life: "All the influences were lined up waiting for me. I was born, and there they were to form me ..." (Bellow 1954a: 43). Throughout, he portrays himself as conducting a heroic struggle against the efforts of others to mould him according to their values, a struggle in which he represents the comic spirit, ever-questioning, ever-questing. Like Shawmut, he emphasises the intrinsically comical aspect of his appearance, describing himself as a child as "overgrown and long-legged in my short pants, large-headed, with black mass of hair and cleft chin - a source of jokes" (Bellow 1954a: 30). Others view him as a buffoon ("Poor March, anything can make him laugh", Clem remarks), but, Augie gives us to understand, his laughter is not a sign of dim-wittedness, but rather of a sceptical intelligence (Bellow 1954a: 47). When Einhorn tells Augie "You've got opposition in you. You don't slide through everything. You just make it look so", Augie comments that "This is the first time that anyone had told anything like the truth about myself" and indeed this becomes the keynote in his explanations of himself (Bellow 1954a: 117). He is forever asserting his independence, telling us that "I was never as much imposed on by Einhorn as he wanted me to be", "I was not going to be built into Mrs.Renling's world", "I was eternally looking for a way out", and he ends by reviling the gurus who have tried to recruit him to their version of reality (Bellow 1954a: 76, 151, 347).

I'm good and tired of all these big personalities, destiny molders, and heavy-water brains, Machiavellis and wizard evil-doers, big-wheels and imposers-upon, absolutists.

(Bellow 1954a: 524)

Yet the very profusion of nouns here indicates a continued fascination with, and reverence for, such figures. Indeed, his "opposition" notwithstanding, Augie is dominated throughout the novel by a succession of "reality-instructors", and ends it under the sway (philosophically, as well as financially) of just such a one, in the form of Mintouchian. Like Mosby, Augie would like us to believe that his laughter acts as a corrective to his pride, an antidote to self-importance.
I wasn't proud of myself, believe me, and my stubbornness about a "higher", independent fate. I was no wizard, for sure, nor gazetted as anything illustrious, nor billed to stand up to Apollyon with his horrible scales and bear's feet, nor slated to find the answers to all my shames like Jean-Jacques on the way to Vincennes sinking down with emotion of the conception that evil society is to blame for all that happened to warm, impulsive, loving me. There was no such first-rate thing that I could boast and who was I, not to make up my mind and be so obstinate? The one thing I could say was that though I wanted this independent fate, it wasn't merely for my own sake that I wanted it.

Oh, but why get too earnest? Seriousness is only for a few, a gift of grace, and though all have it rough only the favorites can speak of it plain and sober.

(Bellow 1954a: 424)

Characteristically, Augie has recourse to mythologising rhetoric to explain his insistence on what he calls elsewhere "a fate good enough" (Bellow 1954a: 318). He manages to place himself in exalted company, fictional and historical (Bunyan's Christian, and Rousseau, respectively) by telling us at great length that he does not belong in such company (a form of occupatio of which Augie is particularly fond). His method of allusion, too (referring to Rousseau by his first name only and to Christian through mention of one of his most famous combatants), in spite of its affected air of insouciance, strives, through its obliquity, for an intellectual elitism: Augie is flattering himself and the reader, effectively saying "You and I, members of the intelligentsia as we are, can dispense with the slavish formalities of identifying all references". In trying to disavow any pretensions to "seriousness", he reveals that it is this quality, rather than the comic spirit which he professes as his guiding doctrine, that he truly reverences. Indeed, the awed, religiose tones with which he speaks of it ("a gift of grace", given only to the "favourites", or, he might have said, elect) and of his "pilgrimage" through life (Bellow 1954a: 424) anticipate Shawmut's resolution to "listen to words of ultimate seriousness" and enact that very seriousness that they describe.

Augie has often been claimed as a spiritual cousin of Huck Finn - for his robust sense of humour, his jovial gainsaying of social pressures, his cheerful resilience, his
restless, inquiring energy. Yet, while Bellow's novel undoubtedly contains allusions to Twain's novel (most obviously in the "Adventures" of the title and Augie's repeated use of the phrase "I lit out"), Augie has rather less in common with Huck than is often implied (Bellow 1954a: 274, 305). Whereas, at the end of Twain's novel, Huck famously lights out for the territory, still refusing the blandishments of "sivilisation," Augie ends the novel as an embittered, exiled black-marketeer, working for a man whom he doesn't respect (Mintouchian), married to a woman whom he doesn't love (Stella) and living on memories of a lost youth. Because these memories are colourful ones, and because we are not made aware of the circumstances under which Augie is telling his tale until late in that tale, it is all too easy to accept Augie's own evaluation of his life, as he summarises it in the final words of the novel.

Look at me, going everywhere! Why I am a sort of Columbus of those near at hand and believe you can come at them in this immediate terra incognita that spreads out in every gaze. I may well be a flop at this line of endeavour. Columbus too thought he was a flop, probably, when they brought him back in chains. Which didn't prove there was no America.

(Bellow 1954a: 536).

This passage is commonly quoted by critics who take it at face value, as an affirmation of Augie's pioneering spirit and irrepressible joie de vivre. Which is undoubtedly how Augie intends us to take it. The comparison with Columbus is perhaps more pertinent than Augie realises, however; the explorer ended his days disillusioned, his dreams of glory frustrated. Whatever else the analogy may signify, it represents the final example of a tendency to self-mythologisation on the part of Augie that is more reminscent of Tom Sawyer than Huck Finn, and more reminscent of Don Quixote (to whose adventures the title of Bellow's novel might also allude) than either of them.

Like the hero of Cervantes' novel, Augie is bewitched by books to such an extent that he continually figures his life as a mythical narrative and explains himself in terms of the heroic figures who populate his imagination. Early on in the novel, Augie asks
that we

don't think that, if handled right, a Cato could have been made of me, or a young
Lincoln who tramped four miles in a frontier zero gale to refund three cents to a
customer. I don't want to pass for such legendary presidential stuff.

(Bellow 1954a: 23)

Much later he tells Clem Tambow that "I don't consider myself any Prospero" -
an allusion, perhaps, to Prufrock's "I am no Prince Hamlet" (Bellow 1954a: 456).
Elsewhere, however, Augie compares himself (either overtly or by implication) to
Robinson Crusoe, Achilles, Christ, Leicester (Elizabeth I's favourite and alleged lover),
and Henry Ware (Bellow 1954a: 84, 103, 160, 315, 512). The cumulative effect of
repeated invocations of heroic figures of this kidney, is precisely to suggest that Augie
does want us to place him in their ranks.

Discussing his mother's subservience to Grandma Lausch, Augie remarks that
she "occupied a place, I suppose, among women conquered by a superior force of
love, like those women Zeus got the better of in animal form and who next had to take
cover from his furious wife" and Grandma Lausch herself, threatening to die, is "like a
Pharoah or Caesar promising to pass into a God" (Bellow 1954a: 10, 37). His brother
Simon is likened to Alexander the Great and St.Francis, has "the grace of Chevalier
Bayard and the hand of Cincinnatus at the plow" and "intended to carry me along with
him, when it was time, the way Napoleon did his brothers" (Bellow 1954a: 231, 424,
29, 53). Mrs. Klein is "popelike", Eleanor Klein has "a Circassian bow to her eyes",
Mrs. Renling has the ruthlessness of Medea and "praised the male in all things as if she
was working for Athena", Clem Tambow is "lacking only laces and swords to be a
follower of decayed Stuarts in exile", Lucy Magnus has in her "the burden that made
Phedra cry she wanted to throw off her harmful clothes", Mintouchian has the bearing
of Clemenceau (Bellow 1954a: 38, 40, 138, 143, 206, 244, 477). Even the eagle falls
prey to Augie's mythologising passion, as he names it Caligula and informs us that "it
looked to be close kin to the one that lit on Prometheus once a day" and that it had
"humanity mixed with it, such as there was in the beasts that embraced Odysseus and his men and wept on them in Circe's yard", while its lizard victims are described as "gilded Hyperion's kids" (Bellow 1954a: 331, 355, 347). Nor is Augie's mythomania confined to the major figures in his life; while waiting for news from Thea in Acatla, he takes up with a Russian for a few days who looks "like a picture of the poet D'Annunzio that I once saw" (Bellow 1954a: 411). The greatest focus of his mythologising, however, is William Einhorn.

Einhorn is introduced at the beginning of Chapter V with a eulogy which insists on his greatness with a tortuous earnestness that seems to exclude irony.

William Einhorn was the first superior man I knew. He had a brain and many enterprises, real directing power, philosophical capacity, and if I were methodical enough to take thought before an important and practical decision and also (N.B.)* if I were really his disciple and not what I am, I'd ask myself, "What

\[34\] Augie's affinity with the eagle, Caligula, is repeatedly emphasised. After the first abortive attempt to get the bird to hunt, Augie feels that he is associated with the bird's failure: "While she [Thea] was unpleasantly stirred against Caligula, I felt a little condemned with him" (Bellow 1954a: 349). When he fails a second time, this link is reinforced, as Augie "once again ... felt implicated, because he had been tamed on my arm" (Bellow 1954a: 355). Later, the impotence of the bird is implicitly related to a lack of virility in Augie. "Now that he [Caligula] had flopped, he did even more harm. Suddenly Thea and I appeared to have lost the place, and I was bewildered. What was the matter that pureness of feeling couldn't be kept up? ... how could you ... keep the feelings up? [my italics] (Bellow 1954a: 359). The imagery of detumescence here clearly has a sexual dimension (the process of training an eagle to hunt is known as "manning"), and indeed we learn later that Thea has been seeking sexual satisfaction elsewhere. When she leaves him, Augie flies into a rage, displaying the aggression and destructive power that Caligula could never muster and exulting in the fear of his prey, as a confirmation of his masculinity.

\[35\] Swooping and bursting, I tore up rocks ... kicked to pieces the snake cases ... and watched the panic of the monsters as they flowed and fled, surged for cover [my italics].

(Bellow 1954a: 397)

In addition to the episodes involving Caligula, bird imagery is common elsewhere in the novel, particularly in descriptions of Augie and Einhorn. Augie speaks of himself as "circling" in search of a "direction," for example, and Einhorn is said to have "the round eyes of a bird" and to have a "beaky" appearance (Bellow 1954a: 84, 105, 91).
would Caesar suffer in this case? What would Machiavelli advise or Ulysses do? What would Einhorn think?" I'm not kidding when I enter Einhorn in this eminent list. It was him that I knew, and what I understand of them in him. Unless you want to say that we're at the dwarf end of all times and mere children whose only share in grandeur is like a boy's share in fairy-tale kings, beings of a different kind from times better and stronger than ours. But if we're comparing men and men, not men and children or men and demi-gods, which is just what would please Caesar among us teeming democrats, and if we don't have any special wish to abdicate to a lower form of existence out of shame for our defects before the golden faces of these and other old-time men, then I have the right to praise Einhorn and not care about smiles of derogation from those who think the race no longer has in any important degree the traits we honor in these fabulous names. But I don't want to be pushed into exaggeration by such opinion, which is the opinion of students who, at all ages, feel their boyishness when they confront the past.

* FDR in one of his Fireside Chats made a deep impression on the nation by saying, "N.B." - which means Nota Bene.

This passage is not just a eulogy of Einhorn; it is also a manifesto or apologia for Augie's mythologising - and indeed his whole manner of narration - throughout the novel. A mixture of humility ("if I were really his disciple and not what I am" - an aside that also carries a hint of self-disgust at his - as yet unrevealed - status as a black-marketeer?) and pride ("I have the right to praise Einhorn"); of satirical pedantry (as illustrated in the footnote in which Augie explains the meaning of N.B.) and self-conscious rhetoric ("I don't want to be pushed into exaggeration by such opinion"); of comic bathos (the association of Einhorn with Caesar, Ulysses and Machiavelli) and dignified defiance of the "smiles of derogation" that result, Augie's panegyric is full of ambiguities and unanswered questions - not the least of which is how far is Augie himself aware of these ambiguities?

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35 Kenneth Trachtenberg makes equally extravagant claims for his uncle, Benn Crader, in More Die of Heartbreak, suggesting that he is destined to be a "Citizen of Eternity":

To name at random a number of such Citizens will reveal what the word "Eternity" signifies: Moses, Achilles, Odysseus, the Prophets, Socrates, Edgar in King Lear, Prospero, Pascal, Mozart, Pushkin, William Blake.

(Bellow 1987a: 69)
When Augie advances Einhorn's eminence by linking him with men of legendary shrewdness and strategic skill, there is a doubt over how serious he is - whether he is deliberately striving for a mock-heroic effect. Augie anticipates and resolves this doubt, however, by insisting that he is "not kidding" in making these comparisons - a statement which also rules out the possibility that Augie is being unwittingly bathetic, as he is clearly aware of the bathetic potential of ending his "eminent list" of celebrated schemers with Einhorn. Having assured us that he is serious in placing Einhorn in this exalted company, Augie then adds a qualification: namely, that our age may be so far debased in comparison with the golden eras in which his other exemplars of prudence lived, that heroic grandeur is no longer within the compass of human endeavour. Of course, he distances himself from this viewpoint by positing it initially as a response that we might have ("Unless you want to say ... " [my italics]), then by attributing it to an unspecified intellectual school of thought ("those who think" and "such opinion" [my italics]), which finally is identified as "the opinion of students ... [of] all ages".

Such rhetorical sleight of hand cannot hide the fact that (a) the argument for historical degeneration is one that Augie's constant appeals to mythical and historical figures implicitly endorses;36 (b) in voicing this argument as the only possible objection that one might raise to the bracketing of Einhorn with Caesar et al, Augie glosses over the more essential question of Einhorn's intrinsic worth, regardless of historical precedent - Einhorn is a (not particularly) successful gangster and Augie, as a black-

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36 This view of history was shared by the young Bellow, who wrote, in an application for a Guggenheim scholarship, of the "devaluation of man" that had taken place since the nineteenth century. "The scope of the mind has, through science, been immensely extended while that of the personality has shrunk" (quotted in Atlas 1992: 66). The idea that mankind had degenerated, physically and spiritually, in the New World, derived originally from eighteenth-century European naturalists such as Buffon and Raynal, was a source of both anxiety and satirical refutation in American literature (see for example chapter 6 of Jefferson's Notes on the State of Virginia and "The Author's Account of Himself" in Washington Irving's The Sketchbook). For a dissenting voice, however, see Emerson's essay "History".
marketeer, may be a truer disciple of his hero than he realises, or would care to admit;
(c) Augie himself, as the erudite (or would-be erudite) tone of this passage amply illustrates, is a student - Einhorn's student - and one who speaks elsewhere of modern "times of special disfigurement and world-wide Babylonishness" (Bellow 1954a: 76).
Einhorn is too closely bound up with Augie's self-image - surrogate father, mentor, confessor, teacher, corrupted idealist, auto-didact and would-be philosopher - for Augie to retain any objectivity in his portrayal. It is Einhorn who teaches Augie to take himself seriously, to reverence learning, and to reinvent others in the image of legends from myth and history.

Einhorn and Augie fulfill a mutual need. Augie is "a listener by upbringing" (Bellow 1954a: 72), Einhorn has a "teaching turn". "And with his son at the university I [Augie] was the only student he had" (Bellow 1954a: 67). There is "something adoptional" about Augie, and Mrs. Einhorn, suspicious of the intimacy between the two "now and again ... gave me a glance that suggested Sarah and the son of Hagar", a reference that Augie reprises much later in the novel, when he accompanies Thea Fenchel on her hunting expeditions: "it did occur to me how it was inevitable for the son of a Hagar to go chase wild animals" (Bellow 1954a: 151, 73, 322). Einhorn himself likens Augie to Alcibiades (and, by implication, himself to Socrates), commenting on Augie's youthful good looks, "strong as a bronco and rosy as an apple" (Bellow 1954a: 75). Although there is no hint of any sexual relationship between them, they do share an unusual physical intimacy, Augie accompanying Einhorn to the toilet and, on one occasion, carrying the crippled man in and out of a brothel - an incident that prompts the apprentice Augie to out-mythologise his master.

He [Einhorn] used to talk about himself as the Old Man of the Sea riding Sinbad. But there was Aeneas too, who carried his old dad Anchises in the burning of Troy, and that old man had been picked by Venus to be her lover, which strikes me as the better comparison.

(Bellow 1954a: 122)
There is certainly an element of envious fascination and vicariously-felt vitality in Einhorn's regard for Augie, while on Augie's part there is veneration for the old man's style, insight and learning, but perhaps above all - as the Aeneas/Anchises analogy suggests - a feeling for him as a paternal role-model, in the absence of his real father.

Certainly Einhorn's intellectualism, like Augie's, is a curious, comic hotch-potch of half-apprehended philosophies, half-baked truths and half-articulated theories - all relayed in an argot that resembles Philip Roth's recollections of literary discussions at college with Jewish friends, in which Yiddish slang was deployed as "a defence against overrefinement". In the case of Einhorn, however, the absurdity of the clash of cultures is not the product of a self-conscious deflation of his own pretensions as a student of literature, but, on the contrary, of a desire to claim the dignity of erudition.

Paying tribute to his own resilience, he has recourse to Hamlet:

"Augie, you know another man in my position might be out of life for good. There's a view of man anyhow that he's only a sack of craving guts; you find it in Hamlet, as much as you want of it. What a piece of work is a man, and the firmament frotted with gold - but the whole gescheft bores him. Look at me, I'm not even express and admirable in action. You could say a man like me ought to be expected to lie down and quit the picture. Instead, I'm running a big business today". (Bellow 1954a: 75)

Augie is not so blinded by his admiration for Einhorn that he cannot detect the old man's embellishments on reality (he interrupts Einhorn after this last assertion to

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37 For example, Ted Solotaroff, a contemporary of Roth's, recalls that Isabel Archer was referred to as a "shiksa" [sic] during discussions of The Portrait of a Lady (Roth 1988a: 114-5).

38 At times Bellow himself sounds a little like this. Compare the following passage in which he reflects on the lessons of King Lear.

In Lear you are told "ripeness is all". We must abide our going hence even as our coming hither and all the rest of it ... You know, this sense of the mystery, the radical mystery of your being, everybody's being.

(Bellow 1994: 302)
tell us "that was not the pure truth; it was the commissioner who was still the main wheel"), but Einhorn's merry mangling of Shakespeare is swallowed whole, and his unashamed egoism - "Look at me" - is adopted by Augie, who precisely echoes this imperative in the closing passage of the novel, quoted earlier (Bellow 1954a: 75).

More often than not, Augie conspires with Einhorn in his self-inflating rhetoric, rather than undermining it. Perhaps the most spectacular instance of this is the sustained analogy between the tragedy of Croesus and Einhorn's misfortunes that opens Chapter VII, and that has the function, if not the form, of an epic simile.

I'm thinking of the old tale of Croesus, with Einhorn in the unhappy part. First the proud rich man, huffy at Solon, who, right or wrong in their argument over happiness, must have been the visiting Parisian of his day, and condescending to a rich island provincial. I try to think why didn't the warmth of wisdom make Solon softer than I believe he was to the gold- and jewel-owning semibarbarian. But anyway he was right. And Croesus, who was wrong, taught his lesson with tears to Cyrus, who spared him from the pyre. This old man, through misfortune, became a thinker and mystic and advice-giver. Then Cyrus lost his head to the revengeful queen, who ducked it into a skinful of blood and cried, "You wanted blood? Here, drink!" And his crazy son Cambyses inherited Croesus and tried to kill him in Egypt as he had put his own brother to death and wounded the poor bull-calf Apis and made the head-and-body shaved priests grim. The Crash was Einhorn's Cyrus, and the bank failures his pyre, the poolroom his exile from Lydia and the hoodlums Cambyses, whose menace he managed, somehow, to get round.

(Bellow 1954a: 106)

Augie introduces his epic analogy in a characteristically ingenuous tone, as though musing aloud -"I'm thinking"- but as he proceeds, it becomes clear that there is nothing spontaneous or tentative about his recasting of the Croesus drama. Instead, we have a carefully premeditated, thoroughly conceived typological scheme, in which every aspect of Einhorn's plight corresponds symbolically with a legendary counterpart. It is a scheme designed to confer on Einhorn the stature of the tragic

39 It seems likely to me that this passage derives from a projected "novelette" concerning Croesus, of which Bellow speaks in an application for a Guggenheim scholarship (see Atlas 1992: 66).
Like the archetypal tragic hero, Oedipus, Einhorn/Croesus is ennobled and spiritually enriched through suffering, becoming in old age "a thinker and mystic and advice-giver". The bathetic culmination of this tripartite testament to his guruism, however - "advice-giver" sounds an awkwardly prosaic note after the ascendancy from "thinker" to "mystic" - reveals the strain of the analogy. Where Croesus was a mystic, Einhorn is a mere advice-giver and the attempted apposition serves only to emphasise the difference. This is even truer of the last sentence of the paragraph, in which the incongruity of scale between the story of Croesus, with its family blood-feuds, and the story of Einhorn, with its financial miscalculations, is comically evident. Indeed the disjunction between the Einhorn elements and the Croesus elements lies not just in this difference of scale, but also in the way that inanimate, circumstantial features of Einhorn's story are made to correspond with Croesus's fleshly tormentors: Cyrus becomes the Crash, Cambyses a group of hoodlums etc.

Such anomalies do not faze Augie, however. Above all, the possibility of Einhorn being ordinary, unexceptional, must be vigorously denied. Speaking of his penchant for feeling up women, Augie manages to find refinement in sexual molestation: "You couldn't rightly say it was a common letch he had; it was a sort of Solomonic regard of an old chief or aged sea-lion" [my italics] (Bellow 1954a: 77). For Augie, nothing can be common where Einhorn is concerned. He is likened to a state governor, Louis XIV, Pope Alexander VI, Chanticleer, Croesus and Hephaestus, and is said to be "one of the chiefs of life" and to possess "old-time greatness ... true noble and regal greatness" [my italics] (Bellow 1954a: 83, 64, 67, 71, 66, 155, 106, 295). The use of the phrase "old-time" here echoes the earlier reference to "the golden faces of ... old-time men" - the mythic heroes with whom Einhorn is deemed to rank (Bellow 1954a: 60).

Like Don Quixote, Augie hankers after a golden age - an heroic age in which he might have been fabled and feted for his "opposition". Although he stops short of Quixote's full-scale fantasies, he shares with him an earnest, childlike enthusiasm for a
romantic world that exists only in his own mind. Augie's description of his wife - "There is a certain amount of simple-mindedness in Stella as well as deception, a sort of naïve seriousness" - would serve as an acute summary of his own personality (Bellow 1954a: 527). Augie flaunts his learning at every opportunity with the enthusiasm of the autodidact, but beneath the erudition lies an essential simple-mindedness; he cultivates an air of comic detachment, but beneath lies a naïve superseriousness that is itself comic.

Towards the end of the novel, Augie admits that "I had been wrong again and again" and then attempts, half-heartedly, to reassure us -"I don't want to give a false impression of one hundred percent desperation" - but despair is the abiding impression that we are left with, despite the attempt to resuscitate hope in the final passage with one final "laugh at nature ... that ... thinks it can win over us" (Bellow 1954a: 526, 536). The laugh is hollow: nature does win over us and over him. Augie tries to win us over, but his laughter, like that of Mosby and Shawmut, is not a celebration of resilience, but an attempt to conceal disillusionment and self-disgust.

At the same time as he clearly cherishes the idea of comedy as a defining feature of his mature work, Bellow is keen to temper this comic exuberance with an awareness of the distress that laughter can deflect, evade, exploit, or exult in. In one interview, commenting on his experience of the writing process, he maintains that "it can be extremely painful, even when I'm laughing very hard as I do the thing" [my italics] (Bellow 1975c: 22). I think that Bellow's implication here (that it is incongruous and even paradoxical to couple pain and laughter) is misleading. If we substitute "especially" for "even" we may get closer to the truth. For Bellow comedy is painful, partly perhaps because his comedy often draws attention towards, and originates from, pain, rather than seeking to escape from it, but mostly because it is a source of anxiety for him, because he fears that he himself may become the butt of the joke.

His novels are populated with autodidacts, shamans, academics and pseudo-philosophers, whose intellectual preoccupations are clearly in some sense Bellow's own
but who, at the same time, we are invited to see as eccentric or even ludicrous. These figures desperately want to be taken seriously, but conceal this craving behind a facade of humour. In other words, they use comedy as an alibi and say, with Falstaff: "I am not only witty in myself, but the cause that wit is in other men" (2 Henry IV: I ii 9-10).

Augie, Mosby and Shawmut are indeed comic figures, but not in the sense that they believe themselves to be. What is comic about them is not their displays of wit, but their superseriousness - the gravitas which they accord themselves. In assuming postures of enlightened self-awareness, they reveal only the darkness of self-ignorance. In claiming the ability to laugh at others because they can laugh at themselves - using comedy as an alibi - they only reveal their essential egoism, their attempt to use comedy to testify to their own superiority.

Is Bellow aware of these ironies, or is he too their victim? Certainly, he is extremely sensitive to the latent absurdity of intellectual discourse - the folly incipient in pretension - and for every hero who sees himself as a "suffering joker" (Bellow 1965a: 11) there is another character who sees him as a "solemn buffoon" and who recognises the comedy of his misplaced seriousness (Bellow 1966a: 8). Yet he is also clearly sympathetic - even at times sentimentally affectionate - towards these solemn buffoons. This affection is less evident in the short stories: it is much easier to identify Mosby and Shawmut as unreliable narrators than it is Augie.40

With Augie (and, to varying degrees, with Henderson, Herzog, Charlie Citrine and Kenneth Trachtenberg), Bellow is having his cake and eating it (that is, coinciding with his hero's sentiments to a large extent and yet reserving the right to diverge from him, and even satirise him); performing the same manoeuvre as James Joyce in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and Thomas Mann in Tonio Kröger. Perhaps unfairly - because he is an American post-modernist as opposed to a European modernist - he is rather less likely to be allowed to get away with it.

40 This is one of the reasons for my belief that Bellow is a better short-story writer than a novelist (see conclusion).
High Anxiety And Low Comedy: Incongruity in Joseph Heller

Like Bellow and Roth, Joseph Heller has had to confront the dilemma of the comic writer who wants to be taken seriously and, like them, he has tended to dramatise this dilemma, to turn it into a psychomachia in which the suppression and expression of comic impulses compete for supremacy. Whereas in Bellow's and Roth's accounts, comedy represents authenticity, in Heller's scheme it is something to be distrusted, a temptation best resisted. "I don't want to be a humorist ... Something Happened is a serious novel" he told Richard Sale in 1972, pointing out at the same time that

I tried very hard in Catch-22 to take out anything that would only be of a humorous nature, that didn't contribute to the feeling of absurdity.

(Heller 1972: 68, 71)

Ten years earlier Heller admitted that, despite his vigilance, "There were certain instances ... where I just could not avoid putting something in [Catch-22] because it made me laugh" (Heller 1962b in Kiley & McDonald 1973: 285). The tone of this admission is rather like that of an errant schoolboy owning up guiltily to defacing an otherwise serious essay with the odd facetious remark. Heller appears to regard the laughs in Catch-22 as things which would have been best omitted: misdemeanours which slipped through the moral cordon of self-censorship. This is entirely consistent with his views on comedy as a genre.

Heller once told an interviewer "I realize I'm considered a humorous fellow, but the truth is I wouldn't bother writing comedy" (Heller 1967 in Nagel 1984: 206) and when Sam Merrill asked him whether he considered comedy trivial, Heller replied in the affirmative (Heller 1975b in Golson 1981: 412). He also claimed that he
wasn't aware that *Catch-22* was a funny book until I heard someone laugh while reading it. The experience was pleasant but also unsettling. ... I'm suspicious of comedy.

(Heller 1975b in Golson 1981: 411)

Elsewhere, he states that "*Catch-22* is anything but a comedy. It's almost heartbreakingly" (Heller 1970a in Kiley & McDonald 1973: 299). The only one of his novels that he readily admits is a comedy is *Good As Gold*, and he judges that "not a book with that much depth" (Heller 1986b in Ruas 1986: 172). *Good As Gold* is an anomaly, because Heller's objective as a writer is "to be successful in writing what I and other people would consider a serious work" (Heller 1986b in Ruas 1986: 172).

Nevertheless, the temptation to be funny often wins out. "I can make jokes about anything" (Heller 1994b: 34), Heller claims in a recent interview, and there are times in his work when the comedian's thirst for laughs seems to triumph over the artist's desire to be taken seriously, when pragmatism wins out over aesthetics:

Comedy for me is something to use, and because I do it easily, I don't do it sparingly. I will shift from a scene that is very emotional, perhaps almost painfully so, into something really flippant. If you ask me to justify it in literary terms, I can't.

(Heller 1986b in Ruas 1986: 171)

However, Heller does go on to justify it in literary terms, averring that "I feel the flippancy, the switch in tone is good in context or I wouldn't do it" (Heller 1986b in Ruas 1986: 172). For Heller the context in which such a switch in tone is good is when it prevents emotional self-indulgence, particularly in the form of sentimentality.

All my books have come dangerously close to being sentimental. It's one of the things I'm very much on guard against. If I let myself go, I would become maudlin.

(Heller 1986b in Ruas 1986b: 172)

Whereas for Roth and Bellow letting themselves go means embracing comedy - assuming the mantle of comic writers - for Heller comedy acts as a restraint, a means
of deflecting pain, of avoiding excessive emotion. When asked about a remark that his sister allegedly made about his own emotional life, Heller responded: "She would never describe me as repressed. But I am less emotional than most people" (Heller 1994b: 34). This might lead us to expect that Heller's comedy is of the Bergsonian sort - that which leads to a momentary anaesthesia of the heart, a suspension of sympathy, a superior detachment - but in fact Heller's comedy often quickens rather than numbs our sympathies; for each shift in tone from the painful to the flippant, there is a shift from the flippant to the painful. It seems that Heller himself is caught in something of a catch-22: he uses comedy as a means of averting sentimentality, but fears that in doing so he will forfeit his claim to seriousness, so he laces the comedy with emotion, which in turn incurs the risk of sentimentality.

Has Heller's critical reception justified his high anxiety over the tone of his novels? Norman Mailer called the ending of *Catch-22* "hysterical, sentimental and wall-eyed for Hollywood" (quoted in Potts 1972: 18), but more commonly Heller is criticised for being facetious, for sacrificing intellectual integrity on the altar of laughter. Stephen Potts refers to "the questionable seriousness of purpose" of *Good As Gold* (Potts 1972: 60), Robert Merrill complains of *God Knows* that "Heller's constant temptation is to contrive a series of one-liners that undermine David's authority as a character" (Merrill 1987: 121) and David Seed suggests that Heller "regularly establishes perspectives which will facetiously or ironically undermine the implicit solemnity of his ostensible subjects" (Seed 1989: 2). Other critics have, on the other hand, emphasised the gravity of Heller's comedy. Vance Ramsey writes that the humor of *Catch-22* "serves to lower the reader's defences, so that the full force of the horror may be felt" (Ramsey 1973 in Kiley & McDonald 1973: 226), Robert Brustein claims that "Heller will never use comedy for its own sake" and that "*Catch-22*, despite

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41 The hero of *Something Happened*, Bob Slocum, who describes himself as repressed, is accused by his daughter of "always try[ing] to laugh and joke your way out whenever something serious comes up" (Heller 1974: 200).
some of the most outrageous sequences since *A Night at the Opera*, is an intensely serious work" (Brustein 1961 in Nagel 1984: 30), Julian Mitchell points out that "*Catch-22*, for all its zany appearance, is an extremely serious novel" (Mitchell 1962 in Nagel 1984: 32) and James Nagel calls it "a comic masterpiece of tragic seriousness" (Nagel 1984: 1). Perhaps the most perceptive observations on the nature of Heller's comedy are those made by Kurt Vonnegut, who noted, of Heller's first two novels, that "Both books are full of excellent jokes, but neither one is funny" and who characterised Heller as "a first-rate humorist who cripples his own jokes intentionally - with the unhappiness of the characters who perceive them" (Vonnegut 1974 in Nagel 1984: 93).

If there is little agreement on the seriousness of Heller's work, there is less on what sort of comic tradition - if any - he might belong to. Potts, Ramsey and Leon F. Seltzer speak of "Absurdity" (Potts 1972; Ramsey 1973 in Kiley & McDonald 1973; Seltzer 1979 in Nagel 1984), Brustein of "grotesque comedy" (Brustein 1961 in Nagel 1984: 29), John Aldridge of "Black Humor" (Aldridge 1979 in Nagel 1984), John Wain of "farce" (Wain 1963 in Kiley & McDonald 1973: 70) and Constance Denniston of "Romance-Parody" (Denniston 1973 in Kiley & McDonald 1973). Who exactly are Heller's influences, then, and what kind of comic writer is he?

For Heller, writing was initially very much a Bloomian struggle against titanic literary forbears, Hemingway chief among them. The short stories published before *Catch-22* are almost unrecognisable as the work of the author of that novel; by Heller's own admission they were the apprentice-work of a novice, yet to find a voice or a subject: "I didn't have any concept of what I should write - almost everything I wrote was imitative" (Heller 1986b in Ruas 1986: 148). Comedy in these stories is conspicuous only by its absence (with the notable exception of the climactic scene in "Castle of Snow", in which the middle-aged protagonist, returning home from a futile

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42 In his later book *Catch-22: Antiheroic Antinovel*, Potts calls it "one of the first and most original creations of literary postmodernism" (Potts 1989: 8).
attempt to find work during the Depression, joins the children in his street, frolicking in
the snow, and is berated for his immature behaviour by his shamed wife: "In the
street... like an idiot. With the children in the snow like an idiot" [Heller 1948: 55].

With the publication of his first novel, however, Heller left the tentative, spare
realism of these early stories behind and deliberately set out to break not merely his
own mould, but that of a whole tradition of serious writing.

I wanted to recruit a cast of eccentrics or 'types' who would have virtually no
precursors in the tradition of realistic fiction... I regarded them as cartoon
eccentrics, not real people intended to represent mental aberration and collapse.
(Heller 1975a: 56)

Although already well into the writing of Catch-22 when Mailer's novel was
published, Heller may nevertheless be alluding here to The Naked and the Dead, which
represents arguably the last word in the American tradition (the tradition of Crane and
Hemingway) of war novels depicting "real people" whose "mental aberration and
collapse" under the pressures of war is documented in painstaking detail. However, it
wasn't simply that Heller was uninterested in producing a realistic portrait of military
life in the Second World War, it was that the war itself wasn't his subject at all.
Rather, it was a metaphor for the post-war political climate in America.

Catch-22's pretty much about a quarrel, a conflict, a predicament I think we in this
country have had ever since the end of World War II... not so much from foreign
military force but from our own authorities and our own superiors.
(Heller 1970b in Kiley & McDonald 1973: 357)

43 There may be an allusion here to the biblical episode in which King David celebrates
the bearing of the Ark of the Lord into his city by "leaping and dancing" "with all his
might... girded with a linen ephod", a display of public exuberance which earns the
scorn of his wife, Michal, who greets him with withering sarcasm: "How glorious was
the king of Israel to day, who uncovered himself... as one of the vain fellows
shamelessly uncovereth himself?" (II Samuel 6: 16, 14, 20).
Heller returns, of course, to the life of David for his 1984 novel God Knows.
On this point Heller is insistent. In an interview in 1962 he claims that the novel amounts to "almost an encyclopaedia of the current mental atmosphere" (Heller 1962b in Kiley & McDonald 1973: 275), and that its content derives from our present atmosphere, which is one of chaos, of disorganization, of absurdity, of cruelty, of brutality, of insensitivity, but at the same time one in which the majority of people, even the worst people, I think are basically good, are motivated by humane impulses.

(Heller 1962b: in Kiley & McDonald 1973: 276)

Heller's distinction between the poisonous atmosphere of American society during the Cold War years, and the essential humanity of the individuals who make up that society, is one that many satirists have made and, insofar as *Catch-22* is a satire, its targets are clearly institutions rather than individuals. There are, however, individuals who become effectively synonomous with the institutions that they represent and we might expect contemporary figures of this sort to be lampooned (albeit perhaps less obviously than in a more overtly political satire, such as Roth's *Our Gang*) in the novel. McCarthy is one such figure (and the trial scenes in *Catch-22* may owe as much to him as, I shall argue later, they do to Kafka), and General MacArthur is another. MacArthur may be particularly important, because he provides a link between the Second World War (he led the Pacific campaign) - the setting of Heller's novel - and the Korean War - which the novel is "more about" (Heller 1970a in Kiley & McDonald 1973: 296).

In a review of General MacArthur's *Reminiscences* for the *New York Review of Books*, William Styron writes, of the military top brass, that

far from corresponding to the liberal cliché of the superpatriot, [they] are in fact totally lacking in patriotism ... Most of them ... are spiritually bound to a Service, not a country ... A true military man is a mercenary ... and it is within the world of soldiering that he finds his only home.

(Styron 1984: 228)
MacArthur was just such a "genuine militarist" and, "like all of this breed", he was "almost totally without humor" (Styron 1984: 228). Could MacArthur have provided the inspiration for Heller's military top brass? Certainly, the monomania and insane egoism of the high command on Pianosa bear more than a passing resemblance to the MacArthur of the *Reminiscences*, as he emerges in Styron's review.

MacArthur's autobiography "is almost totally free of self-doubt", his "habit of self-congratulation" is augmented by a capacity for "employing characteristic fantasy in order to obscure the pathetic truth" and the news agency over which he presided during the Pacific campaign was "an organization dedicated to glorifying MacArthur" (Styron 1984: 224, 231, 232, 230).

General Dreedle is possessed by a MacArthur-like conviction of rectitude and self-belief, an unquestioning faith in the system of which he is a part: "his credo as a professional soldier was unified and concise: he believed that the young men who took orders from him should be willing to give up their lives for the ideals, aspirations and idiosyncrasies of the old men he took orders from" (Heller 1962a: 214). So convinced is he of his own omnipotence, that he is surprised to learn that it is beyond the bounds of his authority to order the execution of Major Danby (Heller 1962a: 238).

General Peckem, meanwhile, shares MacArthur's narcissism (he "liked listening to himself talk, liked most of all listening to himself talk about himself") and his passion for self-publicity (he writes memoranda "praising himself and recommending that his authority be enhanced to include all combat operations" and runs a "large department" dedicated to "let[ing] people know how good we are" [Heller 1962a: 316, 313, 314]).

Colonel Cathcart is similarly obsessed with garnering any favourable media exposure, but lacks the resources of Peckem; the nearest he gets is the abortive scheme to organise the saying of prayers before every mission, in the hope of emulating the Colonel whose photograph is published by *The Saturday Evening Post* because his company follows this practice. Like Styron's MacArthur, Cathcart has a tendency to
fantasise wildly about events, "multiplying fantastically the grandeur of his victories and exaggerating tragically the seriousness of his defeats", so that his life becomes a series of "overwhelming imaginary triumphs and catastrophic imaginary defeats" (Heller 1962a: 186). Cathcart also shares with MacArthur a wide-ranging paranoia. Styron notes that MacArthur typically blames his misjudgments "on the Navy, on something he calls 'Washington,' or an even more nebulous something he calls 'my detractors'" (Styron 1984: 229); Cathcart believes that "Everybody was persecuting him" and attributes his "black eyes" (the term he applies to incidents which he feels have cast him in a bad light) to the malign designs of these conspirators (Heller 1962a: 186).

Finally, there is the "ambitious and humorless" (Heller 1962a: 69) Scheisskopf, who ends the novel as the highest-ranked of all the characters, although he starts it as a mere lieutenant (Heller's contempt, expressed in the name of his character - "shithead" in English - is thus matched by the army's reverence). His meteoric rise is entirely appropriate, for Scheisskopf is the ultimate bureaucrat in the ultimate bureaucracy. To refer once more to Styron, military life typically consists, among other things, of "mountains of administrative paperwork" and "daily tedium unparalleled in its ferocity" (Styron 1984: 229). This is very much the picture of military life that we get in *Catch-22*. Heller himself has cited Céline's *Journey to the End of the Night* as a "direct inspiration" in the composition of *Catch-22* (Heller 1962b: 277), but, although it has its fair share of gruesome episodes (the chapter entitled "The Eternal City", the deaths of Snowden and Kid Sampson, and the spectre of The Soldier in White, linger particularly in the memory), it seems to me that *Catch-22* is more existential comedy than nightmarish vision. The world of *Catch-22* is a

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44 The tradition of this type of nomenclature in comedy goes right back to Aristophanes and can be traced through Ben Jonson, Dickens and numerous other comic writers in English, but perhaps the direct antecedent of Scheisskopf is Teufelsdröckh in Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*. 
world of deadening ritual, drained of meaning, a world closer to Kafka and Beckett than to Céline.

At the start of the novel, we find Yossarian engaged in the task of censoring letters written by the enlisted inmates: "It was a monotonous job, and Yossarian was disappointed to learn that the lives of enlisted men were only slightly more interesting than the lives of officers" (Heller 1962a: 8). To relieve the tedium, Yossarian begins to tamper with the letters, signing some of them "Washington Irving" and others "Irving Washington" - a trick which Major Major emulates after a C.I.D. man quizzes him about the mysterious signatures later in the novel. His administrative duties are even more tedious and pointless than those forced upon Yossarian.

Most of the official documents that came to Major Major's desk did not concern him at all. The vast majority consisted of allusions to prior communications which Major Major had never seen or heard of. There was never any need to look them up, for the instructions were invariably to disregard. In the space of a single productive minute therefore, he might endorse twenty separate documents each advising him to pay absolutely no attention to any of the others.

(Heller 1962a: 90-91)

In this cyclical system of bureaucracy, all activity is self-cancelling - the very notion of what is "productive" is inverted, as it is in Yossarian's reflections on his contribution to the officers' club:

there were many officers' clubs that Yossarrian had not helped to build, but he was proudest of the one in Pianosa. ... It was truly a splendid structure, and Yossarrian throbbed with a mighty sense of accomplishment each time he gazed at it and reflected that none of the work that had gone into it was his.45

(Heller 1962a: 18)

45 In this, as in much else in Catch-22, there are affinities with Beckett, who, in Molloy, takes similar delight in inverting common tropes: "Yes, it was an orange pomeranian, the less I think of it, the more certain I am" (Beckett 1979: 13).
While Major Major and Yossarian combat their boredom by facetiously defacing documents, others turn boredom into an art-form. Yossarian's friend and fellow patient, Dunbar, "was working hard at increasing his life-span. He did it by cultivating boredom" (Heller 1962a: 9). Orr, meanwhile, tinkers compulsively with an oven, assembling and dismantling it in a seemingly meaningless ritual (whose purpose only becomes clear with the revelation of his escape to Sweden). Sometimes, this deliberate repetition becomes grotesque, as with the chorus of moans at the briefing before the Avignon mission (Chapter 21), the behaviour of Nately's Whore's kid sister (whose emulation of her sister's every act extends even to the attempted murder of Yossarian), Dunbar's confrontation with the officer in the Roman brothel (Chapter 33), the reappearance of The Soldier in White (Chapter 34), and the episode of "The Soldier Who Saw Everything Twice", when Yossarian deliberately repeats the soldier's every word, in the hope of convincing the doctors that he is suffering from the same mysterious ailment.46

46 More generally, this iterative impulse is reflected in the narrative structure of the book (in which most events are related twice or more, the narrative continually doubling back on itself) and in the dialogue, much of which has an echolalic, circular quality that is reminiscent of Beckett's drama. Compare, for example, the following dialogues, from Catch-22 and Waiting For Godot.

Dreedle: If he wasn't a chaplain, I'd have him taken out and shot.
Cathcart: He's not a chaplain, sir.
Dreedle: Isn't he? Then why the hell does he wear that silver cross on his collar if he's not a chaplain?
Cathcart: He doesn't wear a cross on his collar, sir. He wears a silver leaf. He's a lieutenant colonel.
Dreedle: You've got a chaplain who's a lieutenant colonel?
Cathcart: Oh no, sir. My chaplain is only a captain.
Dreedle: Then why does he wear a silver leaf on his collar if he's only a captain?
Cathcart: He doesn't wear a silver leaf on his collar, sir. He wears a cross.

(Heller 1962a: 303)

Vladimir: Poor Pozzo.
Estragon: I knew it was him.
Vladimir: Who?
Estragon: Godot.
Vladimir: But it's not Godot.
"I see everything twice!" the soldier who saw everything twice shouted when they rolled Yossarian in.
"I see everything twice!" Yossarian shouted back at him just as loudly, with a secret wink.
"The walls, the walls! the other soldier cried. "Move back the walls!"
"The walls, the walls!" Yossarian cried. "Move back the walls!"

(Heller 1962a: 180)

Yossarian believes that the soldier has hit on an excellent ruse and vows to emulate his every move. Then, "During the night, his talented roommate died, and Yossarian decided that he had followed him far enough" (Heller 1962a: 180). This is an excellent example of the process that Kurt Vonnegut describes, the process by which Heller deliberately cripples his own jokes through the unhappiness - or we might say the anxious self-consciousness - of those who perceive them.

In his sequel to Catch-22, Closing Time, Yossarian comments on the relationship between self-consciousness and comedy.

What I could never trust about high comedy ... is that people say funny things and the others don't laugh. They don't even know they are part of a comedy.

(Heller 1994a: 79)

This is partly an aesthetic point: Yossarian rejects the artifice of high comedy, which pretends to be unaware of its own comic status. However, for Heller, as well as for Yossarian, the degree to which comedy is self-aware is also a moral issue, an index of its seriousness. In Catch-22, much of the comedy is low, rather than high: it is the comedy of slapstick, of pantomime, of farce. However, it is not escapist. Unlike high

Estragon: It's not Godot?
Vladimir: It's not Godot.
Estragon: Then who is it?
Vladimir: It's Pozzo.

(Beckett 1988: 77-8)
comedy, this is comedy aware of its responsibilities and limitations, anxious comedy.

The episode in which Hungry Joe tries to take nude photographs of Luciana is typical.

Hungry Joe had paused in his attack to shoot pictures through the closed door. Yossarian could hear the cameras clicking. When both he and Luciana were ready, Yossarian waited for Hungry Joe's next charge and yanked the door open on him unexpectedly. Hungry Joe spilled forward into the room like a floundering frog. Yossarian skipped nimbly around him, guiding Luciana along behind him through the apartment and out into the hallway. They bounced down the stairs with a great roistering clatter, laughing out loud breathlessly and knocking their hilarious heads together each time they paused to rest. Near the bottom they met Nately and stopped laughing.

(Heller 1962a: 160)

Here the hi)inks of Yossarian and Luciana are abruptly interrupted by the spectre of Nately, a figure whose naïve seriousness, unlike that of Augie March, stems from a non-egoistic romanticism, and marks him out, as the Old Man prophesies, for an early death. The two lovers are laughing at their own hilarity (as the grammatical ambiguity of the phrase "hilarious heads" suggests - heads that are laughing hilariously and that are hilariously funny), at Hungry Joe's manic behaviour, and at the incongruity of their laughter in the historical context in which they find themselves - an incongruity rudely reinforced by Nately's sudden appearance, which stops their laughter in their throats. This pattern - of hysterical antics coming to an abrupt halt and being succeeded by a renewed sense of despair - recurs in other scenes in the Roman brothel and in several scenes in the hospital, such as the synchronised molestation of Nurse Duckett.

Next morning while she [Nurse Duckett] was standing bent over smoothing the sheets at the foot of his bed, he [Yossarian] slipped his hand stealthily into the narrow space between her knees and, all at once, brought it up swiftly as far as it would go. Nurse Duckett screamed and jumped into the air a mile, but it wasn't high enough, and she squirmed and vaulted and seesawed back and forth on her divine fulcrum for almost a full fifteen seconds before she wiggled free and retreated frantically into the aisle with an ashen, trembling face. She backed away too far, and Dunbar, who had watched from the beginning, sprang forward without warning and flung both arms around her bosom from behind. Nurse Duckett let out another scream and twisted away, fleeing far enough from Dunbar.
for Yossarian to lunge forward and and grab her by the snatch again. Nurse Duckett bounced along the aisle again like a ping-pong ball with legs. Dunbar was waiting vigilantly, ready to pounce. She remembered him just in time and leaped aside. Dunbar missed completely and sailed over the bed to the floor, landing on his skull with a soggy, crunching thud that knocked him cold.

He woke up on the floor with a bleeding nose and exactly the same distressful head symptoms he had been feigning all along. The ward was in a chaotic uproar. Nurse Duckett was in tears, and Yossarian was consoling her apologetically ... (Heller 1962a: 288)

This passage is initially offensive in its light-hearted depiction of what is essentially a sexual assault⁴⁷, and if we were to laugh it would be as a consequence of the suspension of sympathy demanded, according to the Bergsonian scheme, by the automatic behaviour of the characters here. However, the flippant tone shifts radically at the end: the unconscious behaviour of the buffoon gives way to a consciousness of the pain such buffoonery has caused, and Yossarian tries to console his victim. The joke ends not with a bang, but with a whimper - with an anti-punchline. This is the comedy which Bummidge speaks of, a comedy in which "When the laughing stops, there's still a big surplus of pain", a comedy in which "Infinite sadness is salted with jokes" (Bellow 1966a: 77, 78).

The Yossarian of Catch-22, like the Yossarian of Closing Time, and like the author of both novels, is, for all his clowning, fundamentally suspicious of comedy. He explicitly rejects any humorous view of the dangers of war, as an ameliorating fiction.

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⁴⁷ Heller, it seems to me, is if anything more vulnerable to charges of sexism and misogyny than Bellow and Roth, although his depiction of women has not received the hostile attention from critics that theirs has (but then, this may simply be a consequence of the relative lack of critical attention generally accorded to Heller).
strangers he didn't know shot at him every time he flew up in the air to drop bombs on them, and it wasn't funny. And if that wasn't funny, there were lots of things that weren't even funnier. There was nothing funny about living like a bum in a tent in Pianosa between fat mountains behind him and a placid blue sea in front that could gulp down a person with a cramp in the twinkling of an eye and ship him back to shore three days later, all charges paid, bloated, blue and putrescent, water draining out through both cold nostrils.

(Heller 1962a: 17)

The characteristic nonsense grammar of "And if that wasn't funny, there were lots of things that weren't even funnier" might lead us to expect a light-hearted conceit such as the passage concerning Yossarian's (non)-contribution to the officers' club. Instead we get a grim, powerful condemnation of the circumstances in which Yossarian finds himself (the image of the drowned man anticipating the brutal anatomical details of Snowden's death) which gives the lie to criticism that Yossarian's seriousness at the close of the novel in his debate with Major Danby is a jarring inconsistency. In fact, like Bummidge, Yossarian is "earnest when he is clowning and clowning when he means to be earnest" (Bellow 1966a: ix).

At one point in Closing Time Yossarian gives his son some advice about his future. The conversation begins with Michael telling his father that he has dropped out of law school.

"Oh shit ... I keep pulling strings to get you in and you keep dropping out."
"I can't help it ... The more I find out about the practice of law, the more I'm surprised it isn't illegal."
"That's one of the reasons I gave that up too. How old are you?"
"I'm not far from forty."
"You still have time."
"I'm not sure if you're joking or not."
"Neither am I ... But if you can delay the decision of what to do with your life until you're old enough to retire, you will never have to make it."
"I still can't tell if you're joking."
"I'm still not always sure either ... Sometimes I mean what I say and don't mean it at the same time."

(Heller 1994a: 30-31)
This is not the only moment in a Heller novel when the question of comic intent is raised explicitly. In Good As Gold, Bruce Gold, exasperated by the self-contradictions of his old college friend and presidential aide, Ralph Newsome, asks him whether "people here ever laugh or smile when you talk that way?":

"What way, Bruce?"
"You seem to qualify or contradict all your statements."
"Do I? ... Maybe I do seem a bit oxymoronic at times. I think everyone here talks that way. Maybe we're all oxymoronic. One time, though, at a high-level meeting, I did say something everyone thought was funny. 'Let's build some death camps,' I said. And everyone laughed. I still can't figure out why. I was being serious.

(Heller 1979a: 122)

Whereas Yossarian's earnest clowning is self-conscious, in Ralph's case it is unconscious, and this turns him into a caricature. The comic incongruities of Ralph's speech reflect his moral evasiveness, his refusal to accept responsibility for anything; Yossarian's use of incongruity, however, reflects his open-mindedness, his rejection of absolutism. Later in Closing Time Yossarian confesses that "A problem I have ... is that I'm almost always able to see both sides of the question" (Heller 1994a: 189). However, Yossarian's schizophrenia - meaning something and not meaning it, joking and being serious at the same time - is not a disease, but a skill, a form of sceptical comedy of which Heller himself is particularly fond.

Much of Heller's comedy springs from incongruity. Sometimes this involves inserting a single, subversive word into a sentence that otherwise makes perfect sense, as when Yossarian says of Dunbar that he is "One of the finest, least dedicated men in the entire world" (Heller 1962a: 14). Sometimes it works by building up our expectations in a certain direction, only to dash them by suddenly wrenching us in the opposite direction, as in the descriptions of the Texan, who "turned out to be good-humored, generous, and likeable. In three days nobody could stand him", Nurse Cramer, who "had ... a radiant, blooming complexion dotted with fetching sprays of adorable freckles that Yossarian detested" and Nurse Duckett, who was "adult and
self-reliant ... there was nothing she needed from anyone. Yossarian took pity on her and decided to help her" (Heller 1962a: 9, 167, 228).

Perhaps Heller’s favourite kinds of incongruity, however, are the oxymoron and the paradox. Examples of both abound in *Catch-22* (for example, "Yossarian was in love with the maid in the lime-colored panties because she seemed to be the only woman left he could make love to without falling in love with"); "He [Colonel Cathcart] was someone in the know who was always striving pathetically to find out what was going on" [Heller 1962a: 132, 186], and in his other novels, too, frequently in the form of aphorisms: "Nothing fails like success"; "If character is destiny, the good are damned" (Heller 1984: 79, 105); "Peace on earth would mean the end of civilisation as we know it"; "Why would a man who had nothing to hide refuse to lie?" (Heller 1988: 100, 38) and "That's the only way to live, by preparing to die!" (Heller 1994a: 33).48

The point about all these jokes is that, by inverting expected linguistic patterns, they subvert conventional wisdom. They force us to re-examine the ways in which we think, and the ways in which we use language - the ways in which we make sense of things. While they may appear glib or simply nonsensical, many of these jokes actually contain a grim truth that arrests our laughter, or salts it until it turns bitter. His old friend and lover Frances Beach accuses the Yossarian of *Closing Time* of having lost his sense of humour ("You sound so bitter these days. You used to be funnier"),49 but the truth is that Yossarian's humour, like Heller's, had always been bitter, his bitterness funny.

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48 This last example has a long history, appearing (in slightly different forms) in Montaigne and in a number of classical texts.

49 I am reminded here of the moment in *Stardust Memories* when the hero of the film (a film director, played by Woody Allen) is told by one of his fans that his earlier, funnier films were much better than his more recent, serious ones. Like Heller, Allen is torn between the desire to be taken seriously and the compulsion to joke, and both these comments might be interpreted as coded ripostes to those seeking only laughs in their work.
Unlike Bummidge, however, in Yossarian's case the paradox is intended and is conceived, in *Catch-22*, as a conscious response to a paradoxical world in which the sane are insane and the insane sane. As Dr. Stubbs remarks, "That crazy bastard may be the only sane one left" (Heller 1962a: 109). There is method in Yossarian's madness - an underlying sanity that expresses itself in his judgment of what is and what is not funny. It is not the capacity to laugh in the face of horror, but the refusal to do so, that is the sign of sanity - and moral worth - in *Catch-22*. One of the greatest indictments of a character in the novel is that he should laugh inappropriately, or urge others to do so. Colonel Cathcart criticises the chaplain for "taking things too seriously" and urges him to "Let me see you laugh once in a while" (Heller 1962a: 276) while persecuting him and General Peckem exhibits a similar sadistic sense of humour (ironically at Cathcart's expense, with whose sycophantic behaviour he likes to "have some fun" [Heller 1962a: 318]). Then there are Yossarian's roommates, who epitomise the mindless heartiness that, in Aarfy, results in rape and murder.

They were the most depressing people Yossarian had ever been with. They were always in high spirits. They laughed at everything. They called him "Yo-Yo" jocularly and ... bombarded him with asinine shouts of hilarious good-fellowship ... (Heller 1962a: 341)

Again, paradox provides the moral key here: the roommates are "depressing" precisely because of their unflagging "high spirits", which jar unpleasantly with the realities of their situation (the use of "bombarded" to describe their heartiness equates their social asininity with that of their military activities, as well as reminding us that Yossarian was a bombardier, before his promotion after the Avignon mission). In Heller's anxious comedy, such essential lack of seriousness represents a moral and aesthetic failing, a failure of imagination that perpetuates the climate of philistinism in
which men like Scheisskopf and Milo prosper.

Whereas Scheisskopf and Milo are unaware of their own absurdity and the joking of Yossarian's roommates is nothing more than "asinine ... good-fellowship", Yossarian and Dunbar's antics, like the horseplay of Vladimir and Estragon, proceed not from self-ignorance, but from self-consciousness; not from exuberance, but from dejection; not from high spirits, but from profound gloom, from existential anxiety. Their periodic attempts to divert themselves are not so much a way of escaping the reality of their situation as a means of "giv[ing themselves] the impression [they] exist" (Beckett 1988: 69).

Like Vladimir and Estragon, Yossarian and his comrades are so numbed by the routines of their lives that their sense of self is blurred. Indeed, military life is essentially organised with a view to eradicating any individuality. Thus, when Nurse Cramer catches Yossarian bed-hopping, she scolds him by reminding him of his status as a cog in the military machine.

"I suppose you just don't care if you kill yourself, do you?"
"It's my self," he reminded her.
"I suppose you just don't care if you lose your leg, do you?"
"It's my leg."
"It certainly is not your leg!" Nurse Cramer retorted. "That leg belongs to the U.S. government."

(Heller 1962a: 286)

While in the army, Yossarian's self, like his leg, is no longer his own. For Sammy Singer, looking back on his army days in Closing Time, this loss of selfhood appears positive.
I experienced in the army a loss of personal importance and individual identity that I found, to my amazement, I welcomed. I was part of a directed herd, and I found myself relieved to have everything mapped out for me, to be told what to do, and to be doing the same things as the rest.\textsuperscript{50} (Heller 1994a: 212)

For Yossarian in \textit{Catch-22}, however, military regimentation degrades, dehumanises and defaces individuals until they are all interchangeable. The episode in which Yossarian is persuaded to stand in for a dead man to appease the grief of his family who have come (too late) to bid him farewell reinforces this point, as does the refusal of the authorities to acknowledge the existence of the dead man in Yossarian's tent who dies before his arrival is registered ("his name was Mudd", we are told, Heller unable to resist the pun) or that of Doc Daneeka, whom they declare dead in the teeth of his own protests (after McWatt crashes his plane, in which Daneeka was officially travelling, into the side of a mountain). At one point the hospital psychiatrist, Major Sanderson, tries to persuade Yossarian that he is actually A Fortiori (another example of Heller's fondness for joke names), merely because he is occupying a bed registered in this name: "I've got an official army record to prove it" (Heller 1962a: 293).

In a sense, then, Yossarian's decision to desert is a decision to assert a selfhood that the army denies and his conversation with Major Danby towards the end of the novel (in which he determines to "save myself") is his self-explanation (Heller 1962a: 437). His refusal to wear a uniform earlier in the novel (after Nately's death) is an important anticipation of this, as the uniform is the most potent symbol of military

\textsuperscript{50} Sammy's sentiments echo those of Joseph, the hero of Bellow's \textit{Dangling Man}, who exclaims in the conclusion to that novel (whether ironically or not is open to question):

I am no longer to be accountable for myself. I am grateful for that. I am in other hands, relieved of self-determination, freedom canceled.
Hurray for regular hours!
And for the supervision of the spirit!
Long live regimentation!

(Bellow 1946: 191)
conformity. In so far as Yossarian is the focal point of the novel, the novel can be viewed as the struggle of one man to escape from the tentacles of an institution that seeks to remove his freedom and his selfhood, a struggle not unlike that of Joseph K. in Kafka's *The Trial*.

Several critics have noted in passing that *Catch-22* has a Kafkaesque quality to it (David Seed, for example, points out that the trials of Clevinger and the Chaplain owe something to *The Trial* [Seed 1989: 37], and Stephen Potts points out that in Heller's dramatisation of *Catch-22* the chaplain echoes the opening line of Kafka's novel [Potts 1989: 98]), but few have made much of the connection. Heller's debt to Kafka is certainly most obvious in the trial-scenes, but it extends well beyond them.

Heller's summary of the case against Clevinger could serve as a humorous (but not inaccurate) epigraph to Kafka's novel: "The case against Clevinger was open and shut. The only thing missing was something to charge him with" (Heller 1962a: 70).

Scheisskopf instigates charges against Clevinger because Clevinger suggests that Scheisskopf's initial failure to win his beloved parades is connected to his decision to appoint cadet officers personally, rather than allowing the men to elect them. This leads Scheisskopf to conclude that

> Clevinger might cause even more trouble if he wasn't watched. Yesterday it was the cadet officers, tomorrow it might be the world. Clevinger had a mind and Scheisskopf had noticed that people with minds tended to get pretty smart at times. Such men were dangerous ... ⁵¹

(Heller 1962a: 70)

Parades constitute the centre of Scheisskopf's world precisely because, of all military activities, it is the most mindless, fuelled purely by bureaucracy.

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⁵¹ This is an allusion to Caesar's remark about Cassius in *Julius Caesar*: "He thinks too much; such men are dangerous" (*Julius Caesar* I ii 195). Heller's admiration for Shakespeare is well-documented, and his works contain many such allusions (see my discussion of *God Knows* in Chapter 2).
Each of the parading squadrons was graded as it marched past the reviewing stand ... The best squadron in each wing won a yellow pennant on a pole that was utterly worthless. The best squadron on the base won a red pennant on a longer pole that was worth even less, since the pole was heavier and was that much more of a nuisance to lug around all week until some other squadron won it the following Sunday.

(Heller 1962a: 71)

Fittingly, Scheisskopf's biggest coup (which earns his squadron permanent possession of the red pennant) derives from his discovery, after "extensive research", of "an obscure regulation" stipulating that "the hands of marchers, instead of swinging freely, as was then the popular fashion, ought never to be moved more than three inches from the center of the thigh" (Heller 1962a: 72).

The irony of Scheisskopf's indictment of Clevinger is that Clevinger is the only other person who takes the parades as seriously as Scheisskopf. Moreover, as soon as he follows Clevinger's advice, his squadron begins to achieve success, which merely confirms Clevinger's intelligence and Scheisskopf's hatred for him (for Scheisskopf intelligence is the greatest anathema of all). Indeed, among the list of charges against him are "being a smart guy, listening to classical music and so on" (Heller 1962a: 74). Scheisskopf's ubiquitous function at the trial further prepares us for the absurd nature of the proceedings.

As a member of the Action Board, Lieutenant Scheisskopf was one of the judges who would weigh the merits of the case against Clevinger as presented by the prosecutor. Lieutenant Scheisskopf was also the prosecutor. Clevinger had an officer defending him. The officer defending him was Lieutenant Scheisskopf.

(Heller 1962a: 74)

When Clevinger invokes "justice" as a standard by which he must be found innocent, the presiding Colonel (who is never named, being identified only as "the bloated colonel with the big fat mustache", the same Colonel who judges the parades [Heller 192a: 74]) interrupts him scornfully:
"I'll tell you what justice is. Justice is a knee in the gut from the floor on the chin at night sneaky with a knife brought up down on the magazine of a battleship sandbagged underhanded in the dark without a word of warning". (Heller 1962a: 79)

The incoherence of the Colonel's definition does not obscure its violence. As far as the military establishment is concerned, Clevinger's trial is in itself necessary proof of his guilt ("Clevinger was guilty, of course, or he would not have been accused" [Heller 1962a: 79]).

The chaplain's trial is conducted according to the same principles - or lack of them.

"That's a very serious crime you've committed, Father," said the major.
"What crime?"
"We don't know yet," said the colonel. "But we're going to find out. And we sure know it's very serious." (Heller 1962a: 373)

At the conclusion of this trial, the presiding "officer without insignia", formally recounting the charges against the chaplain, announces that "we accuse you also of the commission of crimes and infractions we don't even know about yet" (Heller 1962a: 379). The officer's lack of insignia reflects the shadowiness of the whole procedure and moves the chaplain to wonder "Who was he? And what authority had he to interrogate him?" (Heller 1962a: 376). This strikes at the very heart of what is most terrifying about these trials, for they take place in a world where all identity is corporate and all authority is de facto, a world rather like that in which K.'s trial takes place - or rather does not take place.

When K., early in Kafka's novel, asks Fräulein Bürstner whether she believes him to be innocent, she replies "I don't want to commit myself to a verdict with so many possible implications ... it must be a serious crime that would bring an Interrogation Commission down on a man" (Kafka 1953: 33). Later on, Leni advises him to
"admit your fault. Make your confession at the first chance you get. Until you do that, there's no possibility of getting out of their clutches ... "

(Kafka 1953: 121)

Like Clevinger and the Chaplain, the accusations against K. are taken as proof of his guilt; like them, K. is convinced of his own innocence, ignorant of the nature of the crimes of which he is accused, unable to identify his judges, unable to verify their authority. The "they" out of whose clutches K. tries to wriggle are as mysterious and irresistible in their workings as the military in Catch-22.

Fittingly, the credo by which they operate has an alarmingly familiar ring to readers of Heller's novel. In his consultations with his advocate and the painter, K. discovers a legal labyrinth in which all apparent escape routes lead you back to your starting point.

Titorelli informs him that there are three possible ways of eluding the manacles of the Court: "definite acquittal, ostensible acquittal, and indefinite postponement" (Kafka 1953: 169). The first of these is little more than a mirage, since the only means of gaining such a verdict would be to prove the innocence of the accused and yet the Court is "impervious to proof": Titorelli is forced to admit that he has "not met one case of definite acquittal" (Kafka 1953: 170). The second option - ostensible acquittal - turns out to be at best a temporary respite from persecution, and not necessarily even that. Instead, "it is just as possible for the acquitted man to go straight home from the Court and find officers already waiting to arrest him again", in the event of which "The case begins all over again, but again it is possible, just as before, to secure an ostensible acquittal", thus ensuring a perpetual cycle of rereleases and rearrests (Kafka 1953: 176). Even if this does not happen, his freedom remains purely provisional, for "the Judges of the lowest grade ... haven't the power to grant a final acquittal, that power is reserved for the highest Court of all, which is quite inaccessible" (Kafka 1953: 175). The third option - "indefinite postponement" - far from enabling the accused to escape the stranglehold of the Court, requires him to
commit himself to its continuation:

"You daren't let the case out of your sight, you visit the judge at regular intervals as well as in emergencies and must do all that is in your power to keep him friendly ... If you neglect none of these things, then you can assume with fair certainty that the case will never pass beyond its first stages."

(Kafka 1953: 178)

Even when discussing his plight with the priest near the end of the novel (a scene which fulfils a similar function to Yossarian's debate with Major Danby at the end of Heller's novel, providing the hero with an opportunity of explaining himself), K. only receives confirmation of the impossibility of proving his innocence.

"Your guilt is supposed ... to have been proved." "But I am not guilty," said K., "it is a misunderstanding. And if it comes to that, how can any man be called guilty? We are all simply men here, one much as the other." "That is true," said the priest, "but that's how all guilty men talk."

(Kafka 1953: 232)

These double binds are very close in tone to those which repeatedly confront Yossarian and the other victims in Catch-22. Just as, in Kafka's novel, K. finds that attempting to establish his innocence inevitably involves him in a discourse that implicates him as guilty, so, in Heller's novel, Yossarian finds that attempting to establish your insanity inevitably involves you in a discourse that implicates you as sane.

There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one's own safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions. Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn't, but if he was sane he had to fly them. If he flew them, he was crazy and didn't have to; but if he didn't want to he was sane and had to.

(Heller 1962a: 46)
Like the edicts of the Court, the existence of the regulation which gives Heller's novel its name appears to be more legendary and symbolic than actual, but this merely enhances its power. As Yossarian reflects, late in the novel,

Catch-22 did not exist, he was positive of that, but it made no difference. What did matter was that everyone thought it existed, and that was much worse, for there was no object or text to ridicule or refute, to accuse, criticize, attack, amend, hate, revile, spit at, rip to shreds, trample upon or burn up.

(Heller 1962a: 400)

Like the three "possibilities" that Titorelli outlines to K., the choice for Yossarian is no choice at all. When he finally refuses to continue flying missions, he is offered the chance to go home, but only if he plays the role of war hero, publicly endorsing (and therefore continuing to serve) the very institution from whose influence he has tried to free himself. The alternative - to continue flying missions - is, equally, to legitimise the status quo and submit to the military yoke. The other great organisation that looms large in the novel (so large, in fact, that the military command at Pianosa becomes a mere cog in its workings), Milo Minderbinder's M & M Enterprizes, offers a similar Hobson's Choice.

[Milo] raised the price of food in his mess halls so high that all officers and enlisted men had to turn over all their pay to him in order to eat. Their alternative - there was an alternative, of course, since Milo detested coercion and was a vocal champion of freedom of choice - was to starve.

(Heller 1962a: 361-2)

The absurd capitalist dogmatism of Milo's organisation, which leads to such situations as the serving of chocolate-covered cotton as food, and the bombing of his own squadron for profit, reflects the dogmatism of the military authorities themselves. Scheisskopf's parades, Captain Black's loyalty oaths, Colonel Cathcart's bomb patterns (which, late on, we learn are the result of a whimsical hoax on the part of General Peckem), the promotion of Major Major, and, most sinister of all, the perennial raising
of the number of flying missions required - these are all manifestations of an institution where bureaucracy is the goal as well as the method, an organisation whose existence is dedicated solely to perpetuating that existence. K.'s denunciation of the Court as "an aimless institution from any point of view" is equally applicable to the army in Catch-22 (Kafka 1953: 171). The Germans are, it is made clear on a number of occasions, effectively beaten; the purpose of the flying missions is not to hit military targets but to provide a neat aerial photograph of the bomb pattern, and the war effort in Pianosa is, in any case, subordinated to the machinations of Milo's company, whose aim is simply to make the largest possible profits, even if that means prolonging the war.

There is a grim comedy in all of this, a comedy derived from the incongruity between conventional expectations (an army exists to defend its country's interests and defeat its enemies, the law exists to establish innocence or guilt, to dispense justice) and the situations depicted in these novels. When, in the aftermath of the bombing raid orchestrated by Milo, we are told that "Wounded soon lay screaming everywhere" (Heller 1962a: 252), or when K., at the end of Kafka's novel, is brutally murdered, a knife "thrust ... into his heart and turned ... there twice (Kafka 1953: 251), however, we may feel that we have moved beyond even the blackest realms of comedy.

Certainly, Heller's is not the sort of comedy in which the good end happily and our faith in human nature is restored. Yossarian ends the novel with the threat of death as imminent as ever (although Nately's Whore has replaced the army as his antagonist) and his desertion, while it may represent a personal victory over the military, does nothing to undermine its power. For that matter, the endings of Augie March and Portnoy's Complaint are hardly upbeat. Augie, who begins the novel by proudly identifying himself as an "American, Chicago-born" and as an independent spirit who does things "in my own way", ends it in exile, in thrall to a small-time black-marketeer, while Alex ends his narrative howling in anguish, his sexual and psychological obsessions unrelieved (Bellow 1954a: 3).
For all three authors, however, these novels marked a significant change in direction; a change that they have all felt the need to explain in some detail; a change that involved engaging with the concept of comedy (comedy as an idea and ideal), both at the stage of composition and, retrospectively, in the light of their commercial popularity. Sometimes, in their anxiety to be taken seriously, they seem remarkably humourless. At other times, they see their comic instincts as irrepressible. Indeed, this tension (between rejecting and embracing the role of comic writer) is equally apparent in their roles as Jewish and American writers. It is with these tensions that the two following chapters will concern themselves.

52 When Sara Davidson, interviewing Roth, comments that "You seem to take yourself and your work very seriously", he replies "So I do" (Roth 1977b: 53). In conversation with Charles Ruas, Heller confirms that "What I take seriously is this: I'm very pleased with Catch-22, as it remains popular, it remains a classic" (Heller 1986b in Ruas 1986: 174) and Bellow, who remarks that "the American writer ... has been brought up to take [things] seriously", takes himself most seriously of all, if we are to believe Mark Harris's portrait of him (see Harris 1980: passim).
CHAPTER 2

EXPLAINING JEWS: ASSIMILATION, AUTHORITY, AUTHENTICITY

The root of Jewish disquietude is the necessity imposed upon the Jew of subjecting himself to endless self-examination and finally of assuming a phantom personality, at once strange and familiar, that haunts him and which is nothing but himself - himself as others see him ... the Jew has a personality like the rest of us, and on top of that he is Jewish. It amounts in a sense to a doubling of the fundamental relationship with the Other. The Jew is over-determined.

(Sartre 1948: 78)

To be a Jew leads not to a final definition, but to further questions ... Much of the anxiety, outrageousness, despairing humor, careless burlesque, longing and nostalgia of American Jewish novelists depends on the puzzle of identity and allegiance ...

(Gold 1973: 233)

The need to explain himself to himself, to put his own house in order, was a basic drive behind many a Jewish writer.

(Kazin 1966 in Chapman 1974: 591)

The Jewish Writer and the Literary Jew: The Search For Identity

What is a Jew? A question that has exercised the minds of theologians and philosophers, sociologists and politicians; from St. Paul to Sartre, from Maimonides to Marx, from Herod to Hitler, the Jewish "problem" has attracted theories grand and banal, "solutions" barbaric and brilliant. For post-war Jewish novelists, the fate of European Jewry during the war should, one would imagine, assume proportions of an irresistible magnitude and seriousness, be the great subject. Yet, while there has been no shortage of writing about the Holocaust by Jewish authors (ranging from the shrill ahistorical populism of Leon Uris to the restrained eye-witness documentation of Primo Levi), the subject has, if anything, proved more attractive to non-Jewish
novelists (among many others, Thomas Keneally, William Styron, D.M. Thomas and Martin Amis have produced controversial novels dealing with the Nazi persecution of the Jews). ¹

Perhaps Adorno’s famous contention that there can be no poetry after Auschwitz accounts for some writers’ reticence; for American-Jewish novelists, however, there is also the problem of their remoteness from the suffering undergone by European Jews during the war. Before the war, many American-Jewish intellectuals distanced themselves from, where they acknowledged at all, their Jewish roots. Many were affiliated to, or at least in sympathy with, some branch of Marxism, one of whose tenets, of course, is the rejection of all religious ties. One of these pre-war Jewish Marxists, Irving Howe, writes of his attitude to Jewishness then in the following terms:

In the years before the war people like me tended to subordinate our sense of Jewishness to cosmopolitan culture and socialist politics. We did not think well or deeply on the matter of Jewishness - you might say we avoided thinking about it. Jewishness was inherited ... [it] did not form part of a conscious commitment, it was not regarded as a major component of the culture I wanted to make my own ... While it would be shameful to deny its presence or seek to flee its stigma, my friends and I could hardly be said to have thought Jewishness could do much for us or we for it.

(Howe 1983: 251)

Howe’s urbane humility (his reluctance to identify himself with Jewish culture, he implies, deriving as much from his feeling that he could do little "for it" as from the feeling that it could do little for him) does not quite conceal the underlying feeling that

¹ Roth observes:

for a Jewish American writer there’s not the same impetus ... that there is for a Christian American ... to take the Holocaust up so nakedly as a subject ... For most reflective American Jews, it is simply there, hidden, submerged, emerging, disappearing, unforgotten.

(Roth 1985b: 136)
it was precisely the stigma that an overt Jewishness carried, the obstacle that it presented to effective assimilation, that led him and his friends to minimise its importance. The culture that they wished to "make [their] own" was American culture and any other cultural allegiances would have to be discarded. Howe's post-war enthusiasm for Yiddish writing (he has edited several different collections of Yiddish literature and was at least partly responsible for the "discovery" of Isaac Bashevis Singer) and his persistent championing of Jewish writers (apart from those, like Philip Roth, whom he felt to be undermining the Jewish tradition) make him an exemplary figure in the evolution of the American-Jewish intellectual.

Alfred Kazin, part of the same generation as Howe, provides an equally instructive example of the change wrought by the Holocaust (and the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact) in the attitude of the American-Jewish writer towards his Jewishness. The title of Kazin's first book, *On Native Grounds*, published in 1942, declared his sense of himself as an American, and, in response to a symposium in the *Contemporary Jewish Record* in 1944, he wrote "I learned long ago to accept the fact that I was Jewish without being a part of any meaningful Jewish life or culture ..." (quoted in Guttmann 1971: 91). Yet after the war Kazin publishes a three-volume series of memoirs, the second of which he calls *New York Jew*, and devotes a significant amount of space in his 1962 critical account of the domestic literary scene (*Contemporaries*) to examinations of Jewish writers such as Bellow, Roth, Mailer, Malamud and Singer. Writing of the sense of guilt and futility felt by his generation of American-Jewish intellectuals who tried, after the war, to forge (in both senses of the word) links with their history, Kazin remarks: "The more 'Jewish' we became, the more we were open to the new horror: the past did not exist unless you had lived it yourself" (Kazin 1978: 258).

Norman Podhoretz, a younger member of the American-Jewish critical fraternity (part of what he calls the "third generation" of the "Family" in his autobiography...
Making It), writing of this enthusiastic post-war identification with Jewishness, observes that

Schwartz, Bellow, Rosenfeld, Kazin, Fiedler and Howe ... all proclaimed their Jewishness, took relish in it, wrote stories, poems, articles about it ... more was involved here than the influence of Freud: Hitler's altogether irrefutable demonstration of the inescapability of Jewishness was no doubt an even more important factor in the emergence of this new attitude.

(Podhoretz 1968: 122)

Podhoretz's thesis that it was Hitler who transformed these writers from reluctant into proud Jews agrees with Sartre's controversial claim, in Anti-Semite and Jew, that "it is the anti-Semite who makes the Jew" (Sartre 1948: 69). Yet, despite the undoubtedly drastic impact of the Second World War on the American-Jewish consciousness, the concerns of American-Jewish novels seem to have changed remarkably little in the post-war period. There are, of course, some notable novels by American-Jewish novelists dealing with the theme of anti-Semitism (Bellow's The Victim and Malamud's The Assistant spring to mind), but, as Philip Roth points out in his essay "Imagining Jews," these novels ironically tend themselves to play variations on the stereotypical dichotomy of the suffering Jew-victim and hostile Gentile-aggressor. The twist in both novels comes with the strange, redemptive sympathy that develops between the Jewish protagonists (Asa Leventhal and Morris Bober), and their Gentile (and anti-Semitic) counterparts (Kirby Allbee and Frank Alpine).²

² Allbee and Alpine are counterparts, existing in a symbiotic relationship with the Jews whom they despise and yet also love. Although Bellow has registered his disagreement with Sartre's reflections on the relationship between the anti-Semite and the Jew, his and Malamud's novels certainly seem to owe something to Sartre's theory of mutual dependence. Whereas Sartre observes that "the anti-Semite is in the unhappy position of having a vital need for the very enemy he wishes to destroy", however, Bellow and Malamud's anti-Semites are saved from self-destruction (and ultimately given the will to carry on living) by their Jewish counterparts.
More commonly, however, contemporary American-Jewish novelists internalise the problem of Jewish identity; the challenges to the hero's Jewishness are typically posed not by the hostile Gentile, but by his own community, his family, himself. In their fictional world, the Jew is marked out not as martyr, Christ-killer, or, as Sartre sees him in Anti-Semite and Jew, "quintessence of man, disgraced, uprooted" (Sartre 1948: 136), but rather by his insatiable desire to acknowledge, advertise and explain his Jewishness. When the father of the hero of Nathanael West's early novel, The Dream Life of Balbo Snell, exclaims "I am a Jew! and whenever anything Jewish is mentioned, I find it necessary to say that I am a Jew. I'm a Jew! A Jew!" (quoted in Fiedler 1977: 229), he anticipates the comic self-consciousness of many Jewish fathers (and sons) in post-war American-Jewish fiction.

This self-consciousness rarely takes the form of religious observance, or even of a shared set of traditional values, but seems, rather, to reside in a common conviction of difference, a sense of identity that is curiously reflexive, as Karl Shapiro's comment, in his introduction to Poems of a Jew, confirms.

Being a Jew is the consciousness of being a Jew, and the Jewish identity, with or without religion, with or without history, is the significant fact.

(quoted in Malin & Stark 1964 in Chapman 1974: 670)

3 Those who deny it, like the protagonist of Malamud's "The Lady of the Lake", who loses the glamorous Isabella del Dongo because he fails to realise that her anxiety over his origins betrays her own - as a survivor of a concentration camp - are punished or portrayed as soulless opportunists (cf Isaac Bashevis Singer's "Fate", Leslie Fiedler's "The Last Jew in America", and Philip Roth's "Eli, the Fanatic").

4 Compare Alex Portnoy's outburst: "Jew Jew Jew Jew Jew Jew! It is coming out of my ears already, the saga of the suffering Jews!" (Roth 1986: 72). Perhaps comic is the key word here in assessing the shift in sensibility between pre-war and post-war American-Jewish novels. Novels like Abraham Cahan's The Rise of David Levinsky, Henry Roth's Call It Sleep and Isaac Rosenfeld's Passage Home are all very earnest meditations on Jewish identity (amongst other things), while most post-war novels dealing with similar material do so in a comic (or even parodic) vein.
Sartre too believes that Jewishness is a condition that is divorced from social and historical considerations, but he differs from Shapiro in arguing that it is imposed from outside: it is not the consciousness of being Jewish that makes you a Jew, but the fact that you are perceived in the consciousness of the other as a Jew.

It is neither their past, nor their religion, nor their soil that unites the sons of Israel. If they have a common bond, if all of them deserve the name of Jew, it is because they have in common the situation of a Jew, that is, they live in a community that takes them for Jews.

(Sartre 1948: 67)

This is a crucial distinction and one that bears much of the burden of the conflict between self-assertion and self-denial that we find in American-Jewish writing. On the one hand, the Jewish writer wishes to escape the parochial concerns of his own community and resents the label of Jewish writer as an imposition that marginalises and trivialises his concerns; on the other hand, he jealously guards his Jewishness, in the face of the scepticism of the Gentile literary establishment, as a literary asset, giving him access to a sensibility not available to other writers. Irving Howe sums up the paradox in his autobiography *A Margin of Hope*.

We wanted to shake off the fears and constraints of the world into which we had been born, but when up against the impenetrable walls of gentile politeness we would aggressively proclaim our "difference," as if to raise Jewishness to a higher cosmopolitan power.

(Howe 1983: 137)

Rather like the child who fiercely denounces his parents' retrograde values over the dinner-table at home, but defends these same values vociferously in the company of his contemporaries, the Jewish writer is simultaneously defensive and disdainful of his Jewishness, according to the environment he finds himself in. Norman Podhoretz
notes that when the first generation of the post-war American-Jewish "family"
championed old-world Jewish writers and thinkers, they tended to justify - and
impersonalise - their enthusiasm by scrupulously tracing resemblances and affinities
with the Gentile canon.\(^5\)

They praised Maimonides and Sholom Aleichem ... in terms of St. Thomas,
Wordsworth, Blake and Chekhov. In other words, before they would permit
themselves the luxury of investigating their own origins, they had to be persuaded
that these origins were objects of general interest. They had, as it were, to get the
smell of garlic out of the breath of Jewish culture.

(Podhoretz 1964 in Chapman 1974: 661)

Morris Dickstein - like Podhoretz a younger, and more stridently philosemitic,
member of the "family" - is similarly scathing, and uses similar olfactory imagery, in his
characterisation of the attitudes of this older group of writers to what he too
(somewhat tendentiously, in the title of his essay) calls their "Origins".

The older generation of intellectuals was embarrassed by Judaism: they saw it
through gentile eyes as a disability, a burden ... It reeked of poverty and the
ghetto. It stank of provinciality, tribalism.

(Dickstein 1985 in Phillips 1985: 358)

\(^5\) Perhaps the most famous example of this is Lionel Trilling's essay on "Wordsworth
and the Rabbis", which represents a self-repudiation of the starkest kind, for the pre­
war Trilling had remarked

As the Jewish community now exists it can give no sustenance to the American
artist or intellectual who is born a Jew ... I know of no writer in English who has
added a micromillimetre to his stature by 'realizing his Jewishness,' although I
know of some who have curtailed their promise by trying to heighten their Jewish
consciousness.

(quoted in Schechner 1990: 136)

Trilling's modernised use of an Old Testament phrase ("a micromillimetre") to deny the
positive influence that the Jewish heritage can exert on the language of contemporary
American Jews is (unwittingly?) ironic.
Podhoretz's and Dickstein's rhetoric of shame is somewhat self-righteous and, in its rush to condemn their forbears (a case of slaying the literary father, perhaps), rather glibly dismissive of the genuinely (and often thoughtfully) ambivalent feelings of writers like Bellow, Schwartz and Rahv about their Jewishness. Nonetheless, the element of guilt in the post-Holocaust examination of conscience by the older American-Jewish writers (many of whom had initially opposed American intervention in the war) and in the heightened consciousness of Jewishness among their younger counterparts (whose guilt at having been spared the experience of the war altogether is perhaps no less potent) is incontestable.

The sheer number of autobiographies by American-Jewish writers who have, as explicit or implicit agendas, the desire to explain the meaning of their Jewishness, is remarkable (one thinks of Alfred Kazin's trilogy - the second part of which is entitled New York Jew - Irving Howe's World of Our Fathers and A Margin of Hope, Norman Podhoretz's Making It, Herbert Gold's My Last Two Thousand Years, Isaac Bashevis

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6 George Ziad, in Roth's Operation Shylock, gives an extreme, but ingenious, interpretation of this guilt.

"The destruction of European Jewry registered as a cataclysmic shock on American Jews not only because of its sheer horror but also because this horror, viewed irrationally through the prism of their grief, seemed to them in some indefinable way ignited by them - yes, instigated by the wish to put an end to Jewish life in Europe that their massive emigration had embodied, as though between the bestial destructiveness of Hitlerian anti-Semitism and their own passionate desire to be delivered from the humiliations of their European imprisonment there had existed some horrible, unthinkable inter-relationship, bordering on complicity."

(Roth 1993: 130-1)

Ziad's diagnosis echoes Alfred Kazin's sentiments (and his imagery of conflagration) in New York Jew. Kazin writes of his guilty conviction that "The Jews burned every day in Europe were being consumed in a fire that I had helped to light" (Kazin 1978: 96).
Singer's *Love and Exile*, Meyer Levin's *In Search*, Ronald Sanders' *Reflections on a Teapot: The Personal History of a Time*, Paul Cowan's *An Orphan in History: Retrieving a Jewish Legacy*). Sartre identifies "an almost continuously reflective attitude" as a common feature of Jewish intellectuals who wish to "escape" from their Jewishness, but this modern reflectiveness seems to be the result of the opposite impulse - the wish to return in some sense to a repressed sense of Jewishness. As a Freudian would expect, however, this process of retrieval often raises more questions than it answers. Howard Jacobson, part of a generation of English-Jewish novelists much influenced by Bellow, Roth and Heller (Clive Sinclair, Simon Louvish and Will Self are others), confronts many of these questions in his account of his *Journeys Among Jews* (the subtitle of *Roots Schmoots*, which is, strictly speaking, a travelogue rather than an autobiography, but a travelogue whose aim is to discover its author's origins).

Writing of his (and his Jewish friends') childhood in Manchester in the fifties, Jacobson describes the sense of self-contradiction at the heart of the second-generation Jewish immigrant experience.

We were free of the ghetto and we weren't. We were philosophers now and not pedlars, and we weren't. If we had any identity at all, that was it: we countermanded ourselves, we faced in opposite directions, we were our own antithesis.

(Jacobson 1993: 3)

One route out of the ghetto - one way of removing one's roots from the Old World and replanting them in native soil - is to become a writer. This is simultaneously an act of colonisation and self-assertion - claiming the new language as your own and implying that you can enrich it - and of assimilation and self-sublimation - sanctioning the discourse of your adopted land by entering into it (the Foucauldian view of writing as, inescapably, complicit with the prevailing power
For the Jew in particular, the decision to give public voice to yourself is one that is fraught with political implications and internal conflict.

In an interview to mark the re-release of his autobiography, *Journey Through a Small Planet*, the English-Jewish poet and novelist, Emanuel Litvinoff, tells a joke that nicely sums up the traditional Jewish anxiety not to aggravate the Gentile, the host who might at any moment try to expel or murder his alien guests, if they do not behave themselves.

Two Jews are lined up in front of a firing squad, and one of them starts protesting about his rights. He demands a last cigarette, and also the blindfold to which he is also [sic] entitled. But his companion takes him by the sleeve and begs him, in a pacifying tone, not to make trouble.

(Litvinoff 1993: 23)

If the hyperbolic fear of provoking the Gentile suggested by this joke seems far removed from the likely concerns of any serious writer, consider Arthur Miller's explanation, in 1947, of his decision to abandon the subject of Jewishness after his 1945 novel *Focus*.

I think I gave up the Jews as literary material because I was afraid that even an innocent allusion to individual wrong-doing of an individual Jew would be inflamed by the atmosphere, ignited by the hatred I was suddenly aware of, and my love, [sic] would be twisted into a weapon of persecution against Jews.

(quoted in Chapman 1974: xxviii)

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7 This is the view that Leslie Fiedler takes. He claims that

The writing of the American-Jewish novel is essentially ... an act of assimilation: a demonstration that there is an American Jew ... and that he feels at home!

(Fiedler 1958 in Chapman 1974: 570)
As has been remarked by many Jewish writers, the Jew has always felt himself to be on trial, felt his very existence to be probationary.⁸ There are conflicting strategies that have been (and continue to be) advocated as the most efficacious means of prolonging this existence. These strategies revolve around one central question - to assimilate or not to assimilate? Or, as Howard Jacobson puts it, surveying the differing forms of Jewishness manifested in New York:

to be seen or not to be seen. To make oneself distinguished by becoming invisible versus securing one's safety and bondedness by becoming as conspicuous as possible. Both positions are paradoxical, both were tried out in pre-war Germany and, as adherents of both will tell you, both failed.

(Jacobson 1993: 126-7)

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⁸ Dan Jacobson traces this idea back to the covenant between the Jews and Yahveh.

the sense of being forever on trial, which is one of the consequences of the apparent arbitrariness of the claim to have been specifically chosen, is a constant in Israelite and Jewish history.

(Jacobson 1982: 48)

The Tunisian-Jewish writer, Albert Memmi, writes that

To be a Jew is first and foremost to find oneself called to account, to feel continuously accused, explicitly or implicitly, clearly or obscurely.

(quoted in Howe 1983: 257)

In Operation Shylock, the rare-book dealer (and possible Mossad operative) Supposnik notes that

In the modern world, the Jew has been perpetually on trial; still today the Jew is on trial, in the person of the Israeli - and this modern trial of the Jew, this trial which never ends, begins with the trial of Shylock.

(Roth 1993: 274)

The common interpretation of Kafka's The Trial as an archetypally Jewish work, despite the absence of any Jewish references, also rests to a large degree on this notion.
Becoming an artist is likely to be frowned upon by both camps. If the artist's Jewishness is merely incidental to his work, he is an assimilationist, denying his heritage; if his Jewishness is the subject of his art, he is taken to be representing the community at large and, consequently - inevitably - to be misrepresenting that community. The Jewish writer is therefore doubly on trial: on trial as a Jew before his fellow Jews, on trial as a Jewish writer before the outside world. As Isaac Rosenfeld put it in his essay on "The Situation of the Jewish Writer":

>a Jewish writer unconsciously feels that he may at any time be called to account not for his art, not even for his life, but for his Jewishness.

(Rosenfeld 1962: 67)

In his essay on "The Jewish Writer in America," the American-Jewish poet Karl Shapiro writes of the time when, preparing a collection of critical pieces for publication, he made

the awful discovery that I must define my Jewishness. What has being a Jew got to do with literary criticism? Quite a bit, evidently. The mere act of defending oneself against the shallow Jew-baiting of Pound or the profound racism of Eliot constitutes a "position". And insofar as I have a position, it is bound to be something of a "Jewish position".

(Shapiro 1960 in Kresh 1967: 279)

Some positions are more Jewish than others, however. Even those Jewish writers who achieve a sense of Jewish identity often speak of their Jewishness not with stridency or enthusiasm but rather with oxymoronic tentativeness. The American-Jewish novelist Herbert Gold's autobiography begins with the paradoxical assertion, "By a wide and narrow road I found my way back to an allegiance I didn't possess" (Gold 1973: 7) and Howard Jacobson describes the rediscovery of his Jewishness in
similar terms, as "a slow, unfolding conviction of ancient certainties, of quiet in
disquiet, of the self-possession available only to the dispossessed" (Jacobson 1993: 1).^9

It is no accident, no mere linguistic conceit, that leads these writers to speak of
their Jewish identity as something paradoxical, inherently at odds with itself. In anti-
Semitic folklore, Jews are frequently represented in apparently contradictory guises.
The secretive miser, hoarding his wealth, and the ostentatious arriviste, throwing his
money around; the Communist subversive and the Capitalist exploiter, the Christ-
killing, child-killing, woman- raping aggressor and the sickly, cowering, masochistic
victim; the international conspirator and the ghetto-bound parochialist - all these are
staple ingredients in anti-Semitic propaganda. These stereotypes are of course the
product of lurid paranoia, and so their inconsistency is perhaps hardly surprising, but
Jews - particularly Jewish writers - themselves often characterise Jewish selfhood as
essentially dualistic, or dialectical.\(^{10}\) Morbidly sensitive to (and likely to equate with
anti-Semitism) any Gentile criticism of anything connected with things Jewish, but at
the same time fiercely self-critical, proud and ashamed of their "difference";
intellectually vain and self-deprecating, emotionally effusive and given to sceptical
detachment - these are all "Jewish" traits commonly found in the Jews of post-war
Jewish fiction. Although these traits reflect a more sophisticated and sympathetic

\(^{9}\) The contrast with Alex Haley's *Roots* (which Jacobson's work self-consciously
parodies) is pointed: whereas Haley famously finds his way back to a black homeland
(that is to say his journey has a final destination), Jacobson can only journey *amongst*
Jews. Israel cannot function in the same way for Jewish writers as Africa can for black
writers (except ironically, as in *Portnoy's Complaint*).

\(^{10}\) Abraham Herschel, for example, writes that

Jewish thinking and living can only be adequately understood in terms of a
dialectical pattern, containing opposite or contrasted properties ... [There is] a
polarity which lies at the very heart of Judaism ...

(quoted in Malin 1965: 80)
understanding of Jewishness than those identified by the anti-Semites, there is a sense in which they, too, are part of a process of mythologisation which leads to the creation of an archetypical Jew. In addition to the characteristics listed above, this Janus-faced creature, whom I will call the Literary Jew, is distinguished above all by his environment and his discourse.\textsuperscript{11}

The Literary Jew is essentially \textit{urban}, not merely demographically, but also temperamentally. Typically, he has an aversion to (and is ignorant of) Nature in all its guises, particularly insofar as it symbolises rural life. Sometimes this phenomenon manifests itself in a casual aside, such as when Nathan Zuckerman in \textit{My Life As a Man}, taking tea with his college mentor, Caroline Benson, in her "English" garden, finds himself "amid the hundreds of varieties of flowers, none of whose names he knew ..." (Roth 1974: 17).\textsuperscript{12} Or when, at the beginning of \textit{The Ghost Writer}, Zuckerman, attending his "first Manhattan publishing party," hears the writer E. I. Lonoff dismissed as a subject for serious discussion, "as though it were comical that a Jew ... should have ... lived all these years 'in the country' - that is to say, in the \textit{goyish} wilderness of birds and trees ..." (Roth 1979: 4). Or when Alvin Pepler, in \textit{Zuckerman Unbound}, tells Zuckerman how, when he is told to "take a dive" on a national...  

\textsuperscript{11} It is almost invariably a "he". Although there are a number of prominent American-Jewish women writers (Cynthia Ozick, Grace Paley, Tillie Olsen, Ann Roiphe etc.), I find little evidence in their work (or in that of their male counterparts) of a distinctive female literary Jew.

\textsuperscript{12} Zuckerman's ignorance is partly due to his urban upbringing, but may also be a legacy of his Jewish roots, for, as Stephen Whitfield notes,

\begin{quote}
Eastern European Jewry was so cut off from its environment that its Yiddish vocabulary contained no indigenous names for wild birds and only two for flowers (rose, violet).
\end{quote}

(Whitfield 1984: 212)

Roth himself tells David Plante "Here I live in the country and I don't even know the names of the trees" (Roth 1992: 151).
television quiz show to give way to a Gentile champion, he pleaded "Let him beat me on a subject like Trees ... which is their specialty" (Roth 1981: 37). Or when Alex Portnoy, realising that the street where his Gentile girlfriend lives is called Elm Street because there are elms there, reflects on the Jewish indifference to such arboreal distinctions ("At home who knows the name of what grows from the pavement at the front of our house? It's a tree - and that's it" [Roth 1986: 203]). Or when we are told, of the eponymous hero of Herzog, that "For a big-city Jew he was particularly devoted to country life" (Bellow 1965a: 118-9).

Sometimes, however, it takes the form of a vehemently anti-rustic sensibility: an almost Manichean view of the opposition between city and country, an anti-pastoral genre. In the final section of The Counterlife, for example, Zuckerman postulates a significance for the Jewish ritual of circumcision that defines it as an antidote for a pastoral malaise - a dose of Jewish realism to combat Gentile romanticism.

Circumcision is startling ... but then maybe that's what the Jews had in mind and what makes the act seem quintessentially Jewish and the mark of their reality. Circumcision makes it clear as can be that you are here and not there, that you are out and not in ... Circumcision is everything that the pastoral is not and, to my mind, reinforces what life is about, which isn't strifeless unity. Quite convincingly, circumcision gives the lie to to the womb-dream of life in the beautiful state of innocent prehistory, the appealing idyll of living unencumbered by man-made ritual.

(Roth 1987: 327)

Roth's observations form part of an ongoing feud in the work of Jewish writers with what they see as the sentimentalisation of peasant existence. Even that most pastoral of Jews, King David, takes delight in puncturing the pastoral myth in Heller's God Knows.
Tending sheep is not a vocation for an active mind. I myself preferred the corrupting life of the town to the bucolic diversions of the pasture. At night you were cold, in the daytime you sought shelter from the scorching sun. Where could you go for a good time?

(Heller 1984: 66)

In Woody Allen's films, too, the country is a place where there is no culture and where you are vulnerable to all sorts of dangers (from peasant anti-Semitism to insect life). *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* is full of jokes based on the Jewish fear of country life and when the eponymous hero of *Zelig* is placed under hypnosis for the first time at the country home of Dr. Eudora Fletcher the first thing he mentions is his distaste for the country.

Dr. Fletcher: Now how do you feel about it here?
Leonard Zelig: (Slowly, in a trancelike voice) It's the worst ... I hate the country ... I hate the grass and mosquitos ...

(Allen 1987: 78)

In Howard Jacobson's novels, too, Jewish distaste for Nature is a recurring theme. In Jacobson's first novel, *Coming From Behind*, the highly self-conscious Jewish hero, Sefton Goldberg, tries to define Jewishness in terms of what it isn't, what is inimical to it.

In the highly improbable event of his being asked to nominate the one most un-Jewish thing he could think of, Sefton Goldberg would have been hard pressed to decide between Nature - that's to say birds, trees, flowers and country walks - and football - that's to say beer, bikies, mud, and physical pain.

(Jacobson 1984: 58)

In Jacobson's second novel, *Peeping Tom*, the Jewish hero, Barney Fugelman, finds to his horror that he was Thomas Hardy in a former life. The novel begins with Barney, exiled from his natural habitat of North-West London, sardonically acknowledging the advent of Spring in a Cornish village.
Signs are, even to my drugged eye, that the village is finally coming out of winter. I am not witnessing a return to robustness and sanity exactly - that's too much to expect down here, so far from the soundness of cities, so deep into the obsessional neurosis of Nature - but there is an atmosphere of fragile convalescence abroad, as if the patients have been allowed their first unaccompanied turn around the walled gardens of the institution.

(Jacobson 1985: 7)

This inversion of the conventional literary representation of rural life (signifying rude health and robust constitutions) and urban life (signifying debilitation of body and spirit) is typical of post-war Jewish representations of Nature. Indeed, so entrenched is this antipathy towards Nature - so recognisable as a typical Jewish attribute - that Bellow is able to satirise it. In *Humboldt's Gift*, Humboldt is said to have "suffered keen Jewish terrors in the country" (Bellow 1975a: 27). In "Memoirs of a Bootlegger's Son", an extract from an unfinished novel, the narrator and his father dream of moving to the country, but the mother finds the idea abhorrent.

No synagogue, no rabbis, no kosher food, no music teachers, no neighbors, no young men for Zelda ... she wasn't going to have us grow into cowherds, no finer feelings, no learning.\(^{13}\)

(Bellow 1992c: 20)

The mother's concern that her children grow up as Jews is shared by the father, who berates the young narrator for his immaturity:

"Do you know what you are? ... A chunk of fat with two eyes staring from it. But I'll make something of you. A man. A Jew. Not while I live will you become an idler, an outcast, an Epicurus."

(Bellow 1992c: 22)

\(^{13}\) This is an interesting variation on the American negative catalogue topos (see my discussion of this tradition in the opening section of Chapter 3).
This passage is notable for its characteristic juxtaposition of colloquial language and mythical allusion and for its Yiddish intonation and syntax ("Not while I live ... "). In this it is typical of much of Bellow's prose and of the prose of the Literary Jew, which is often filled with Yiddish inflexions and vocabulary.

Sander Gilman, in his study *Jewish Self-Hatred*, argues that when Jewish authors write "it is always with the anxiety that they use language differently than their reference group, in a way that is understood by it as 'Jewish' ", but this presupposes that their intended audience is their reference group (that is, "that group defined by the outsider as a reference for his or her own identity") and that that reference group is anti-Semitic (Gilman 1986: 11, 2). While these conditions have prevailed in most societies at most periods of history, the case of post-war America may represent an exception.14 Gilman also neglects to consider the internal tension that exists historically within Jewish discourse, whether public or private, whether literary or oral - the tension born of the use of two specifically Jewish languages. Writing of life in the ghettos of Central and Eastern Europe, Mark Schechner notes:

Though degradation and transcendence were profoundly interwoven in their lives, the Jews strove to maintain a formal separation between them and had separate languages for them, as if to remind themselves that their daily cup of bitterness did not set limits on their spirituality. Thus they maintained two languages, Yiddish and Hebrew, the one the language of daily existence and the other the sanctified language of the Sabbath.

(Schechner 1990: 38)

Another crucial facet of this Yiddish/Hebrew dialectic, that Schechner does not mention, is that Yiddish simultaneously embodied the difference and similarity of

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14 This may be one reason why Gilman's section on post-war American-Jewish writers is the weakest in the book. It is also riddled with factual errors: he gives the dates of *Henderson the Rain King* as 1939 and *Herzog* as 1961 and has Zuckerman - rather than Portnoy - suffer impotence in Israel (Gilman 1986: 370, 390).
Jewish and Gentile discourses. On the one hand, Yiddish represented a concession to the outside world, a partial move towards assimilation, in that, although it was spoken almost exclusively by Jews, it was closely linked to a number of other European languages (chiefly German); on the other hand it was written in the Hebrew script. One might say that Yiddish represented difference as stigma and Hebrew difference as sanctity - the two poles of chosenness, blight and blessing, each with its own voice, vying with and answering each other. Although the modern Jewish writer does not have these alternative languages at his disposal, the juxtaposition of different registers of language - the split between the reverential and the irreverential, the rarefied and the quotidian - is still a notable feature of Jewish literary discourse. In the next section I intend to look at one of the more startling manifestations of this split: the juxtaposition of the stately antiquarian prose of the Authorised Version of the Bible (in a sense the English equivalent of Hebrew) with the modern urban vernacular (in a sense the English equivalent of - and in American English, containing liberal smatterings of - Yiddish) in post-war Jewish fiction.

**Joseph Heller and the Jewish Biblical Novel: The Question of Authority**

"I like to think I am not Jewish," Joseph Heller confessed, some thirty years ago (Heller 1962b in Kiley & McDonald 1973: 284), and more recently he claimed to see little in his work that is "peculiarly Jewish" (Heller 1994b: 34). In part this attitude may reflect a fear on Heller's part of being labelled as a Jewish novelist. David Seed warns us that, "In view of the efforts made by some literary critics to force Heller's work into an ethnic category, it is important to stress how secular an upbringing he received" (Seed 1989: 7) and it is certainly true that Heller's own experience contributed to his belief that "an American with a Jewish background is not much different from Americans of Irish background or protestant [sic] backgrounds" (quoted
in Potts 1972: 52). Of his third novel - the first to have a Jew as its hero\textsuperscript{15} - he claimed
that

\textit{Good As Gold} does focus upon the Jewish experience but ultimately Bruce Gold
finds his experience is not particularly more Jewish than, well, mine. I feel that many [Jewish] people my age, people who went to college after the war and
became involved in academic or literary activities, have had experiences that are
not materially different from those of people who aren't Jewish.

(Heller 1979b in Nagel 1984: 177)

Yet just as there is an implied tension between what Heller would like to be the case and what he feels to be the reality in his disavowal of his own Jewishness
("I like to think I am not Jewish"), so here there is a gulf between what Heller would
like his novel to be saying and what he senses it actually says - a gulf evident in the
semantic strain placed on the word "Jewish," which is required to denote difference
and connote uniformity. Although partly a parody of the American-Jewish novel of
assimilation, \textit{Good As Gold} also partakes of that tradition in its condemnation of the
impulse to sacrifice ethnic identity at the altar of material advancement.

\textit{Good As Gold} begins with Bruce Gold deciding to write a book about "the
Jewish experience in America" (Heller 1979a: 11). This is, initially, not so much an
attempt to rediscover roots as a way of making some easy money ("He could toss ...
[it] off swiftly once he had his material. Jews were a cinch. It was good as gold"), but
for an assimilated Jew like Gold, collecting material proves somewhat problematic
(Heller 1979a: 16). Like Sammy Singer and Lew Rabinowitz in \textit{Closing Time} (and
like Heller himself), Gold grew up in the Jewish section of Coney Island and "never
even realized I was Jewish until I was practically grown up" (Heller 1979a: 11). The

\textsuperscript{15} Although Yossarian was initially conceived as a Jew (see Seed 1989: 27) and, in a
recent talk entitled "My Life as a Jewish Novelist", Heller claimed that there was a
sense in which "all of my sympathetic characters are Jewish" (Heller 1995).
rest of the novel follows Gold's attempts to climb the greasy pole of political advancement in the Gentile world of Washington (where he does his utmost to disguise his Jewishness, only to find himself appointed to government committees in the role of "The Jew") while at the same time being increasingly drawn into the political struggles of his very Jewish family (his father, who has never before shown any interest in religion, cites a never-ending stream of Jewish holidays in order to prolong his stay in New York - much to the chagrin of the other members of the Gold clan, who have to put him up and put up with him).

Although neither Gold's family (a collection of comic caricatures, among whom only the father, Julius Gold, is truly memorable) nor the other Jewish characters in the novel are particularly sympathetic, they undoubtedly represent a favourable alternative to the cynical corruption and amoral vacuity of Washington, and the novel ends with Gold returning to the fold, and to the projected book about the Jewish-American experience ("He owed Pomoroy a book. Where could he begin?" [Heller 1979a: 447]). At one point, Gold asks his sister, Janey - the only other member of the family to have attempted to leave behind her roots - some questions about their early childhood, in an attempt to reconstruct some family history. She cannot recall much, but offers instead to tell him about her own Jewish experience.

"It's trying not to be. We play golf now, get drunk, take tennis lessons, and have divorces, just like normal Christian Americans. We talk dirty. We screw around, commit adultery, and talk out loud a lot about fucking."

(Heller 1979a: 87)

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16 Although Marshall Toman argues that Gold's family - in particular his wife, Belle, and his brother, Sid - are the book's "moral center" and that "a familial ethic is the figure in the carpet of Heller's fiction" (Toman 1991: 210).
Janey's version of the stereotypical Virtuous Jew/Sinful Gentile dichotomy differs from Julius Gold's ravings ("Make money!" ... "That's the only good thing I ever learned from the Christians") only in its self-conscious self-mockery (Heller 1979a: 35), but, insofar as this slight, parodic novel can be said to engage seriously with questions of Jewish identity, it seems to reject assimilation, as a manifestation of self-hatred. Moreover, Gold's resolution to explore the meaning of his Jewishness (symbolised by a visit to his mother's grave, whose Hebrew inscription, however, is incomprehensible to him) at the end of the novel has a corollary in Heller's decision to turn to the Bible - the quintessential repository of Jewish origins - for his next novel.

Harold Rosenberg once claimed, in somewhat gnomic fashion, that "The continuity of the modern Jew with the Jews of the Old Testament is established by those acts that arise from his internal cohesion with his ultimate beginnings ..." (quoted in Howe 1983: 256), and, whether we view the rewriting of Old Testament narratives by modern Jewish authors in this light, or as a manifestation of the Jungian collective unconscious, or as a purely literary phenomenon, the frequency with which post-war Jewish novelists have turned to the oldest of Jewish novels for inspiration is notable.¹⁷

In 1946, Paul Goodman, the American-Jewish novelist, poet and playwright, published *The Facts of Life*, a collection of miscellania whose crowning piece is a dramatisation of the Old Testament episode of Jonah and the Whale. Entitled "Jonah: A Biblical Comedy with Jewish Jokes Culled Far and Wide," it features a Jonah who speaks in the unmistakable rhythms of the immigrant Jew, the Jew whose English is peppered with Yiddish expressions and whose syntax is shaped by Yiddish inflexions.

Surprised in the middle of the night in his flat (which he shares with a long-suffering wife and a baby) by the Angel of the Lord knocking at the door, Jonah tries at first to ignore the noise and then grumbles

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¹⁷ Not just Jewish novelists, of course. Probably the most famous post-war biblical novel is Thomas Mann's *Joseph and His Brothers*. 
"It should happen to a dog to be a prophet to the Lord of Hosts ... Maybe - who knows - it's a mistake and He wants to go next door."
(Goodman 1946: 200)

The double blasphemy here - implying that the status of a prophet of the Lord is a benighted rather than a hallowed one, and suggesting that the infallible, omiscient Lord might have sent his Angel to the wrong address by mistake - is on one level an outrageous elaboration on the biblical source, but on another, quite true to its spirit.

The biblical Jonah is similarly querulous; when the penance of the people of Nineveh awakens mercy in the Lord and causes him to retract his sentence of doom, Jonah is "displeased ... exceedingly and ... very angry" (Jonah 4: 1). Up until this point, we have been given no explanation for Jonah's initial disobedience and flight, but now Jonah enlightens us.

"I pray thee, O Lord, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil."
(Jonah 4: 2)

In effect, despite sweetening the pill of reproach with fulsome praise, Jonah here is saying "I told you so" to God; claiming greater powers of foresight than He who is endowed with all knowledge, including foreknowledge. This of course raises an old theological dilemma. How can the notion of God "repent[ing] of the evil, that he said that he would do unto them [the people of Nineveh]" (Jonah 3: 10) be reconciled with the assumption that he must have foreseen their response to his apocalyptic warning? This is not a problem that seems to have occurred to the writers of the Old Testament, but of course they were not seeking to explain or justify the ways of God to man, merely to record them. For Milton, devout Christian though he was, this is not enough, and he grapples with the paradox of freewill and predestination at several
points in *Paradise Lost*. In Book III, for example, God, anticipating the Fall of Man and the question of his responsibility for it, proclaims that

... man will hearken to his glozing lies,  
And easily transgress the sole command,  
Sole pledge of his obedience: so will fall,  
He and his faithless progeny: whose fault?  
Whose but his own?...  
... if I foreknew,  
Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault  
Which had no less proved certain unforeknown.

(*Paradise Lost*, Book III, 93-119)\(^{18}\)

Because of the elliptical nature of the Bible, writers have always been attracted by the prospect of filling in the gaps, explaining the unexplained. Whereas Milton's motivation in *Paradise Lost* is "to justify the ways of God to men", in the works of modern Jewish writers the intention seems rather to question the ways of God to men, or to explain the ways of men - to explain themselves - to God. As the Angel in Goodman's "Jonah" points out to the prophet, explanations are, after all, more in man's line than in God's.

"Say to them [the people of Nineveh] simply: 'Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be destroyed!' This requires no explanation. They will themselves provide plenty of explanations."

(*Goodman 1946: 207*)

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\(^{18}\) These lines are quoted from the Longman edition edited by Alistair Fowler (1971). This argument goes back at least as far as Boethius, who argues in his *Consolation of Philosophy* (written in the early part of the sixth century A.D.) that "foreknowledge does not impose necessity upon the future ... freedom of the will is not infringed by foreknowledge" (Boethius 1986: 155). Boethius goes on to draw a distinction between "simple necessity" and "conditional necessity" (a distinction deriving in part from Aristotle) which fascinated many Medieval writers, including Chaucer, whose *Troilus and Criseyde* is partly shaped, both narratively and thematically, by Boethius's thought.
Goodman's reworking of the Jonah story was followed ten years later by Isaac Rosenfeld's short story, "King Solomon". Rosenfeld goes even further than Goodman in his use of anachronism as a comically deflating device, turning the heroic into the mock-heroic. Introducing the king who in the Old Testament is described as "wiser than all men" (I Kings 4: 31), Rosenfeld's narrator (an unnamed courtier) invites us to consider how unprepossessing he is, what a poor impression he makes - why, most of the councillors are taller, handsomer, and leaner than he. To be sure, he has an excellent voice, but his voice comes through best on the telephone, and he has an unlisted number which no one would give out.

(Rosenfeld 1966: 263)

The Israel of Rosenfeld's story also has a postal service, newspapers, launderettes, cameras, cigars, bicycles, zoos and pinochle. This does not mean, however, that he has simply relocated the story in a contemporary world. Rather, these anachronisms co-exist - indeed are made to collide with - the period detail:

A few [servants of Solomon] go to the well for water - a curious assignment, as the palace has had hot and cold running water for years.

(Rosenfeld 1966: 265)

Rosenfeld's story concentrates on the visit of the Queen of Sheba - an episode which is dealt with in a mere thirteen verses in the Bible and which is full of tantalising lacunae. In the biblical version, Sheba visits Solomon in order "to prove him with hard questions," but all we are told of his display of wisdom is that he "told her all her questions: there was not any thing hid from the king, which he told her not" (I Kings 10: 3). Rosenfeld's narrator dismisses this as "the official account of the visit, which Solomon had written to order ..." (Rosenfeld 1966: 271) and comments
Now this is not only a bit thick, it gets round the question of Solomon's wisdom. What did the King say, when put to it by the Queen? ... Did he advise her what to take for colds, give her a recipe for salad dressing, or speak of building temples and ships? ...

Certainly he did not have the nerve, the gall, to repeat the abominable invention to her face of the two women who disputed motherhood of a child. She would have seen through it right away. And surely he knew this was not the time to quote his sayings; besides, he always had trouble remembering them.

(Rosenfeld 1966: 271)

Rosenfeld's notion that the biblical narratives represent "an official version," which suppresses material which might tarnish the heroic sheen of the key protagonists and invents episodes that will add lustre to it, is one that also informs three novels that deal with the reign of King David: Dan Jacobson's The Rape of Tamar, Stefan Heym's The King David Report, and Joseph Heller's God Knows.

Jacobson - a South African-born, English-Jewish novelist and critic, has turned to the Bible for inspiration on more than one occasion during his career and in 1982 he published a critical study of it, entitled The Story of Stories, which argued that it should be seen as a work with a unity of design, a "cunningly constructed narrative" which seeks to reconstruct the past in ways that will justify the present and influence the future (Jacobson 1982: 111). In the introduction, Jacobson explains the impulses that led him to undertake this study, impulses that derive from his problematic sense of his own Jewishness. The choice of the Bible as a subject, he suggests, "represents an attempt by the writer to make contact with a tradition from which he has always felt himself sundered ..." (the use of the third person here seems to enact grammatically this distance [Jacobson 1982: 2] ) and also to come to terms with the Holocaust:

my curiosity about the idea of the chosen people was sharpened or given a particular focus by an attempt to understand better some aspects of the great catastrophe which fell upon the Jews of Europe in the 1940s.

(Jacobson 1982: 7)
Six years after *The Story of Stories*, Jacobson published *Her Story*, a novel whose larger part is devoted to a second-person narrative in which the story of the mother of one of the thieves crucified together with Jesus (according to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke) is (re)constructed. In choosing to tell the story of such a peripheral figure (the thieves are not even named, and no mention is made of their mothers in any of the Gospel accounts), Jacobson goes further than Goodman and Rosenfeld (who retell well-known biblical episodes, filling in gaps, but retaining the hierarchy of *dramatis personae*) in defamiliarising the familiar. In *Her Story*, Jesus and Mary have only bit parts, and the (unnamed) thief - who in this version is a charismatic, mystic, mountebank - and his mother, take centre-stage.

The reorientation of perspective is not quite so radical, but still considerable, in *The Rape of Tamar*, published some eighteen years earlier. Whereas the protagonist of *Her Story* is ignorant of the fact that her story overlaps with a far more celebrated one, here Jacobson's narrator is acutely aware of his own status, of his place in the (social and historical) scheme of things.

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19 In *The Story of Stories*, Jacobson makes the following remarks, in which the seed of *Her Story* may lie:

Josephus's account of the Roman occupation positively bristles, as it were, with crucifixes bearing the bodies of those who died for their nation and their beliefs. Two of them, dismissed in characteristic fashion by the Gospel writers as "robbers" and "criminals," may have died alongside Jesus.

(Jacobson 1982: 193)
I can't pretend to be one of your anonymous narrators, one of your men in the street, one of your nondescript sons of the people. I am (or I was) the nephew of a king, the cousin of another, the uncle of a third. Ambitious men, all of them, hungry for power and position, eager for applause, determined to be remembered by generations following their own. And successful, too, at getting what they wanted. The name Yonadab may mean nothing to you, but you all know of David, Solomon, Absalom, and many others among my kinsmen.

(Jacobson 1973: 8)

Yonadab, too, is "eager for applause, determined to be remembered by generations following [his] own", but, unlike his illustrious forbears, he is not good at getting what he wants: his life, he admits (from his vantage point on the other side of the grave - he is a spirit-narrator), is an ignominious "failure", his ambitions stifled by a debilitating "scepticism" which makes him "rabid with doubt about the value of every action [he] undertake[s] or see[s] others undertake" (Jacobson 1973: 11, 12). This scepticism also endows him with a sardonic sense of humour, whose target is, in characteristic Jewish fashion, often himself.20

20 A quality which, Jacobson notes in The Story of Stories, is notably lacking amongst biblical narrators:

One thing the biblical writers cannot be accused of is levity. Jokes are not their forte. The nearest they come to what might be called humour is their penchant for irony. In the histories and biographies, as well as in the overall "story of the stories," dramatic ironies abound; in the prophetic writings a persistent use is made of rhetorical ironies of all kinds - sarcasm, invective, mock-incomprehension, the habit of "leading on" the reader to nourish expectations which are then savagely revealed to be illusory.

(Jacobson 1982: 169-70)
it's always difficult to take the dead quite seriously. What a dwarfish, slavish, disadvantaged race of spooks and less than spooks they are! If you choose not to think of them, they have no existence at all. If you recall any one among them, it is only to condemn him to go through a series of actions that, being dead, he can now never revise or modify.\(^\text{21}\)

(Jacobson 1973: 7)

Whereas anachronism in Goodman and Rosenfeld is a source of comedy, here there is anxiety over the gulf between the ancient and modern perspectives; anxiety that it is too wide to be bridged, anxiety that it is too narrow to warrant the effort:

if I sometimes feel embarrassed at the thought of how remote and archaic much of my story may appear to be, I am equally embarrassed at other times by how commonplace, how drearily familiar, you will find it all.

(Jacobson 1973: 8)

Like many another self-conscious Jewish narrator in post-war Jewish fiction, Yonadab dreads above all being banal, boring, predictable. Painfully aware of the significance of the events he is relating and of his own relative insignificance, his very act of narration is in part an attempt to amend this imbalance, to redeem his reputation, to redress his grievance at having been assigned so small a part in the events that helped to shape King David's reign: to become interesting. Here he is allowed to play the role of stage-manager\(^\text{22}\), to re-cast the company of actors; challenge the historians

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\(^{21}\) Yonadab's view runs counter to that of Marcel in *Remembrance of Things Past*, for whom the dead do change in precisely the way that Yonadab claims they cannot; not by their own volition, but by the (inevitable) shifts in the process of memory itself.

\(^{22}\) An image that Yonadab himself uses, unenthusiastically:

I am now condemned to be a stage-manager to phantoms; an annalist (analyst) of apparitions; a spook-spokesman. Not a fate I can be entirely serious about.

(Jacobson 1973: 16)

The pun on annalist/analyst and the playful alliteration (annalist ... apparitions, spook-spokesman) here seem to confirm Yonadab's claim that he views his fate with a certain comic detachment, but elsewhere it seems that death has not rendered the concerns of
of the Old Testament, reclaim his place in posterity, write himself back into the story. Although he implies that oblivion may be a fate preferable to enforced reiteration of failure - "You may well wonder which is worse: to be forgotten, and hence utterly bereft of existence; or to be remembered solely in order to be driven again and yet again through one implacably unvarying routine, leading always to the same conclusion" (Jacobson 1973: 7) - Yonadab is being here (as he is throughout) somewhat disingenuous. Although he is constrained by history to fail perpetually, in telling his own (and others') story, he is able to give his version of events - explain himself - as the Bible so pointedly refuses to do. Yonadab is the first to draw attention to the ambiguities of his confessional narrative (which, like most confessions, seeks attention, and even acclaim, for its revelations, while ostensibly expressing regret and remorse).

his life laughable and imbued him with philosophical aloofness (as it does with Troilus at the end of Troilus and Criseyde, for example). Instead, Yonadab finds that to retell his tale is to relive his life, to feel every hope and disappointment as keenly as he felt them first time around.

Whenever I am compelled ... to experience myself yet again, whenever I have to endure my own consciousness once more, I find it intolerable that my interests and inclinations should be as low and limited as they are, so grovably personal in nature. (Jacobson 1973: 10)

Jonadab (as his name is spelt in the King James version) makes two brief appearances in the biblical narrative, first when he advises Amnon to feign illness and ask for Tamar to minister to him, as the easiest route to the fulfillment of his desires (II Samuel 13: 3-5), and then again, two years later, after Absalom has taken his revenge on Amnon, when he refutes rumours that Absalom has killed all the king's sons, reassuring David that Amnon is the only victim of Absalom's feast (II Samuel 13: 32-35). In neither case are his motives for intervening explained; he is described only as a "friend" of Amnon's and a "subtil" man, but he is not held responsible for either the rape of Tamar, or the death of Amnon, although he appears to have had foreknowledge of both.
Call me an artist, if you like. I won't take it as a compliment. Any more than I will take it as an insult if you call me a pathologically malicious busybody who is compelled to make up for his own emotional vacuity by manipulating the passions and lives of others. Either way, I have to see my *oeuvre* completed, given its inevitable, final shape ...

(Jacobson 1973: 103)

At moments like these, Yonadab's conviction of his own influence on the course of events is plain, but the evidence of this influence is minimalised precisely because it is exerted vicariously. Unlike the artist whose work is exhibited publicly, Yonadab's "*oeuvre*" can be appreciated only by himself (and by the readership he posthumously addresses) and this distinction is perhaps hinted at in the ambiguity of the word "given" (which could, depending on its intonation, mean that Yonadab is compelled by its final shape, as well as - his intended meaning - that it is he who provides its contours).

Yonadab is, in himself, a nobody, a non-person, and this is both his weakness and the source of his power:

there are times when I suspect myself never to have been anything more than a mind inhabited by other minds, a kind of counterfeit personality, whose ability to manipulate others was achieved only at the cost of, or was the direct result of a permanent self-impoverishment, a never-ending haemorrhage of inner identity.

(Jacobson 1973: 79)

Like Iago, whom he resembles in many ways, Yonadab longs for his manipulative genius to be recognised - longs for an audience\(^\text{24}\) - but in order to gain

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\(^{24}\) It might well have been this impulse in Yonadab, suggested by an image in the final chapter of the novel ("If I were appearing in a theatre, as I have sometimes imagined myself to be doing") and in his earlier description of himself as "a stage-manager to phantoms" (see note 8), that inspired Peter Schaffer to write his play, "Yonadab", based on the novel, that was produced at the National Theatre in 1986 (Jacobson 1973: 143, 16).
that recognition, he must be discovered, and to be discovered means ruin (in Yonadab's case, exile; in Iago's torture and, one assumes, execution). Yonadab sums up this paradox:

It's worthless, the power you acquire over others by betraying them! If you do it well enough, your victims don't even know they are your victims.\(^{25}\)

(Jacobson 1973: 112)

Of course, Iago apparently tries to conceal his part in Othello's tragedy even when his web of intrigue has been severed (but not fully unravelled), but what greater coup de théâtre than to maintain his silence at the end; thus ensuring that he will have a captive audience (even though he himself is also captive) after the play has ended? For it is clear that Lodovico, Gratiano and the maimed Cassio will not rest until they have heard his account of events: Gratiano promises Iago, "Torments will ope your lips" (Othello V ii 306).

Yonadab also wishes to extend his spell of fascination beyond the revelation of his involvement in the fate of Amnon, indeed beyond the bounds of life, as he explains in a passage whose enigmatic meditations on the self are worthy of Iago himself (whose "I am not what I am" - possibly a blasphemous inversion of Yahveh's "I am that I am"? - might have served as an epigraph for Jacobson's novel).

\(^{25}\) This is a recurring theme in Jacobson's work. The hero of The Confessions of Josef Baisz, who, like Yonadab, is cursed with a sense of his own insignificance and the desire to overcome it with a grand gesture, betrays those closest to him repeatedly, but is fulfilled not by the betrayals themselves, but by his confessions of those betrayals.

Who knew more than Josef Baisz about ... the astounding sense of absolution and liberation, of being beyond any possible forgiveness, and therefore of no longer needing it, which was the ultimate reward for every act of betrayal and self-betrayal?

(Jacobson 1979: 166)
I am seeking to express and discharge that in myself which I do not know, and never will know, the very self of self, whole and undistracted, summoned up and directed to a single end. And what is the end? Only that that last self should be known by what is not-me, outside me, ever beyond me: that I should become the unknowing knower, known by the unknown. Then ... I have ceased to be myself, yet I shall never be more myself than I am now.26

(Jacobson 1973: 50)

Pursuing the chimera of the sovereign self, complete and indissoluble, Yonadab can only achieve such self-realisation through abandoning his own self and becoming the Other, as he does when we read his narrative, through that unique process of mental colonisation that occurs in reading a novel, when the reader's mind is occupied by another's thoughts, inhabited by another's emotions. To be known, as the old biblical sense of the word implies, means to be entered by the Other, it represents an abdication of sovereignty over the self, a renunciation of that which is mysterious and unknown (this relationship is also implied in that euphemism for the gentials, "the secret parts"). This is perhaps why Yonadab is so fascinated by the prospect of Tamar's rape; it represents the enforced knowing of someone who wishes to remain unknown, a curious demi-parallel with his own situation. Yonadab wishes to be known, but what he wishes to be known for, is being unknowable. He is caught between the freedom to act that obscurity provides and the impossibility of those actions being recognised or recorded while they remain obscure. Towards the end of the novel, he elaborates on this theme.

26 Again, Josef Baisz echoes Yonadab's sentiments (albeit in a rather more prosaic register):

I was not ambitious merely for money or power or fame. My ambition was both grander and more private. It was to be - myself. Or what I felt I might become. To be both wholly and thoroughly what only Josef Baisz could be.

(Jacobson 1979: 81)
We, commoners, fantasists, *voyeurs*, movers of furniture, carriers of messages, extras - we are free men. We can let our thoughts go where they like; in our obscurity ... But princes are slaves and bondsmen, compelled to act out every whim of ours, every fleeting impulse, every lewd desire, every childish dream we ever permit ourselves to have of the annihilation of our enemies and self-exposure to our friends.²⁷

(Jacobson 1973: 126)

Aligning himself here with the "commoners" and "extras" of this world, in direct contradiction of his earlier assertion that he was *not* "one of your men in the street, one of your nondescript sons of the people" (Jacobson 1973: 8), Yonadab also associates the role of princes with that of "self-exposure". In fact, Yonadab himself is a prince by birth, as he reminds us in that earlier passage, and yet he is also an extra in terms of his role at court. His one opportunity to assert publicly his princely status - to expose himself - proves irresistible, but fatal. Just as it is for Tamar, the moment of being known is a moment of fulfilment but at the same time of disgrace. Yonadab claims that he misjudged the situation; that he thought that King David would be grateful to have his worst fears removed, to hear that what has happened at Baal Hazor is not the wholesale slaughter of the princes of the blood, but simply the murder of Amnon. Yet such naïvety seems to me inconsistent with the wily, wary cynicism that Yonadab displays elsewhere, particularly with regard to the nature of the King. Perhaps the fever of the moment overcame his customary prudence? This, too, Yonadab proffers as an explanation: "My ambition seizes me before I have a chance to calculate the costs of what I am doing" (Jacobson 1973: 135). Yet Yonadab has surely anticipated this moment, knowing as he does what chaos is likely to ensue after the murder of Amnon. While it is quite true that, as Yonadab remarks, "Hindsight tempts one to pretend to foresight" (Jacobson 1973: 45), it is also true that original expectations may

²⁷ This may be an allusion to Tolstoy's belief that great men are history's slaves, and/or to Freud's theory that figures of authority in both dreams and stories often represent our parents or our own projected desires.
be retrospectively altered in order to obscure the accuracy of prediction. Or, as Josef Baisz puts it in a later Jacobson novel, "the insidious form of untruth known as 'hindsight' [can be used] in order to re-create the untruth of bygone ignorance" (Jacobson 1979: 77).

The truth is that Yonadab acts as he does in spite of the costs, because for him his moment of glory is worth the disgrace that follows it. Struggling in vain to make himself heard above the baying voices in the court, he sees the vacant throne, from which David has slumped forward to the ground.

Without reflection, I jump on to the throne, David's seat. I am conscious at once of the enormity of the sacrilege I have committed. I know it, strangely enough, by the feeling of omnipotence that fills me; by the conviction I have of my own immunity. It is amazing, the power of that stool. King Yonadab! I have put my dirty feet in a holy place and the holy place is now mine. For the first time in my life I possess the secret of authority. How simple it is to have self-conviction, or - which is not quite the same thing - how simple matters are when you have it!

(Jacobson 1973: 135)

What is so intoxicating to Yonadab about occupying (albeit momentarily - the immediacy of the moment conveyed through the use of the present tense) the throne, is that it imbues him with "the secret of authority" (the authority that he later claims through telling - becoming the author of - his own story); for once his words will be

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28 Jacobson makes the same point in *The Story of Stories*, with regard to the techniques employed in the biblical narratives.

Any cunningly constructed narrative produces in its readers a feeling of "inevitability," which is often enough composed of two apparently contradictory elements. On the one hand, the reader is surprised at the way the narrative has developed; on the other, he feels that it has fulfilled its expectations. Many of the deepest expectations, which a well-constructed story fulfills, in other words, are those which the reader did not consciously realize it had roused in him. He is satisfied in being taken aback, and taken aback by his own satisfaction. Because he sees in a new light everything that has happened earlier in the story, he also imagines he can now see more clearly everything that lies ahead.

(Jacobson 1982: 111)
listened to, his voice rising above the crowd of extras. He will be known, and what he knows (what to everyone else is unknown) will be known: his version of events will be the authorised version, because it is delivered from the seat of authority.

Yonadab returns to this question of authority in the final chapter of the novel, in which he reveals the identity of the court historian whose narrative is the one we read in the Bible, the authorised version (whether we read it in the Authorised Version or not).

A remarkable man, Abiathar. A truly original one. The founder of much more than a mere genre of writing... Before Abiathar, what was there in the way of history? Myths and legends of every variety, many of them obscene and ridiculous; unreliable lists of the names of kings; inflated rolls of battle honours; bloodthirsty execration tablets. Abiathar changed all that and the consequences are still being felt in every aspect of your moral and intellectual life. Before Abiathar, I would add, the illustrious dead slept more peacefully in their caves and groves and pyramids than they have been allowed to since.

It was Abiathar, anyway, who came to me in my retirement (and his) during the reign of Solomon, and asked for my version of the events I have related to you. I told him what he needed to know, and one of his men took it all down. You may still read the story in the pages of his book.

(Jacobson 1973: 143)

Yonadab's double-edged tribute to Abiathar, whose "history" has superseded all the competing "myths and legends of every variety", replacing them with a single authoritative version (which, however, hardly tells the full story, as Yonadab's narrative has witnessed) anticipates the central concern of Stefan Heym's novel, The King David Report, which was published two years later, in 1973.

Heym is a German Jew, who fled the Nazi regime in 1933, taking refuge first in Prague and then in the United States before returning to East Germany during the McCarthy era. His novel deals with the attempts of a historian - Ethan ben Hoshaiha (who has what can barely be described as a bit part in the Bible, being mentioned only as one of a list of wise men whose wisdom, however, is exceeded by Solomon's) - to
smuggle some truth into the account of King David's reign that King Solomon commissions him to write. Like Abiathar in Yonadab's account, Ethan travels around Israel, speaking to as many of the protagonists as possible (Yonadab, however, is not among them) and consulting as many documents as he can gain access to, but - again like Yonadab - he discovers that opinions differ as to what people need to know. Solomon's motive is to establish his own claim to the throne as unassailable and his decision to invest his authority in a *book* that will, in turn - he hopes - invest him with authority, is particularly significant, because of the etymological and symbolic link between authority and authorship.

Like the king of Rosenfeld's story, Heym's Solomon is a plagiarist: his wisdom is spurious and his sayings are stolen. However, while Rosenfeld's king is a rather pathetic figure, whose attempts to please the young by joining in their ball-games are rewarded with the epithet "fucky-knuckles," and whose plagiarism represents a similarly failed attempt to boost his public image ("Every few years he publishes a collection of his sayings, most of which he never said, but the sayings have little to do

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29 This is the biblical passage that gives Heym his hero.

For he was wiser than all men; than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, and Chalcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol: and his fame was in all nations round about.

(I Kings 4: 31)

30 Also because, as Brooke Fredericksen puts it:

our history as Jews is a textual one; it is a history of a people that owes its survival to the Book, and to other books ...

(Fredericksen 1992: 42)

31 Closer, in fact, to the Solomon of *God Knows*, for whose finest moment Heller's David, like Rosenfeld's narrator, has nothing but scorn.

I'll let you in on a secret about my son Solomon: he was dead serious when he proposed cutting the baby in half, that *putz*. I swear to God. The dumb son of a bitch was trying to be fair, not shrewd.

(Heller 1984: 19)
with the case, and their melancholy tone is held to be an affectation"), Heym's Solomon is a bullying tyrant, whose plagiarism is an act of colonisation, an assertion of his power to appropriate anything he desires for his own use (Rosenfeld 1966: 267, 263). When Ethan composes an adage to reflect glory on his king - "the King's wrath was as the roaring of a lion, but his favour as dew upon the grass", Solomon orders his scribes to "Mark it down well, for I am planning a collection of pithy proverbs to evidence my exceeding wisdom" (Heym 1973: 178). Later, having confiscated Ethan's concubine, Lilith (whom Ethan treasures above all else), he adds insult to injury by claiming the love-poetry that Ethan composed in her honour as his own. Amenhoteph, the Egyptian eunuch who forms an ambiguous friendship with Ethan (it is he who informs Solomon of the beauty of Lilith, but he it is also who bids goodbye to the disgraced Ethan, at some risk to himself, at the end of the novel), delivers the crushing news:

Lilith sings unto the King the songs of love which you taught her; and the King is much pleased with them, and he has caused them to be written down for a collection of songs to be published under the title, The Song of Solomon. (Heym 1973: 252)

Long before this final humiliation, however, it is clear that the integrity of Ethan's work is subordinate to Solomon's authority. When Ethan first appears before the king, Solomon explains his desire to erect a literary monolith, a testament to his father's unimpeachable credentials as the Chosen of the Lord (and, by implication, as the chosen heir of his father, to his own), which will stand alongside the temple - the testament to the unimpeachable credentials of the god, Yahveh, who made that choice - as the twin pillars of his kingdom.32

32 Yahveh's struggle to defeat all rivals and be established as the one and only God (of Israel - he seems to tolerate the worship of other gods by other peoples) is indeed a
Israel abounds with stories about him [David], most of them useless, some of them even harmful. Just as I will build a temple for our Lord Yahveh to put an end to this praying and sacrificing on every hilltop behind every village, and to force under one roof what passes between a man and his God, so we must have one authoritative report, to the exclusion of all others, on the life and great works and heroic battles of my father, King David, who chose me to sit upon his throne.  
(Heym 1973: 9)

**leitmotiv** of the Old Testament, and the reign of Solomon marks one of his major setbacks. Solomon is the original *shikse*-fancier, led astray by his association with the Gentile woman, with her exotic tastes and exotic gods.

But King Solomon loved many strange women ...  
For it came to pass, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned away his heart after other gods ...  
For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Zidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites ...  
Then did Solomon build an high place for Chemosh, the abomination of Moab ... and for Molech, the abomination of the children of Ammon.  
And likewise did he for all his strange wives, which burnt incense and sacrificed unto their gods.  

(I Kings 11: 1-8)  

As punishment for his infidelity, Solomon is stripped of his kingdom and this ushers in a black period during which a succession of kings of Jerusalem and Judah (the nation David forged having splintered once again into rival states) seem to vie with each other in doing "evil in the sight of the Lord", the chief of these evils being their devotion to other gods. The message is clear: promiscuity with strange women leads to promiscuity with strange gods, which leads to political ruin. Although David is also led into sin by his sexual appetite (he has Uriah killed in order to make Bathsheba one of his wives), his bigamy is countered by a spiritual monotheism; he never dallies with any gods other than Yahveh, and his status as a godly Jew - despite the fact that he is descended from Ruth the Moabitess - is never in doubt. His sin "in the matter of Uriah the Hittite" (as it is euphemistically referred to in I Kings 15: 5) is a personal one and therefore receives a personal punishment - the death of his son; Solomon's sin is political (religion and politics are practically synonomous in the Old Testament) and therefore receives a political punishment (the dissolution of his kingdom).
The "obscene and ridiculous" myths surrounding David that Yonadab refers to, are also potentially seditious and therefore "harmful"; pluralism can no more be tolerated in popular mythology than in popular religion (indeed the two are virtually synonomous at this time, as Solomon implies). Heym clearly conceived his story, on one level, as a political parable about the position of the writer in a totalitarian state (reflecting his own relationship with the Communist regime in East Germany), but, as he makes clear in his Author's Note that follows the text of the novel, there was also a preoccupation with the uncertain literary status of the Bible - is it history, theology, fiction, philosophy? - underlying his choice of subject.

As I sometimes read the Bible, it occurred to me that this section of it [I Samuel 6 to I Kings 2] represented more than a fine oriental fairy tale or an edifying parable. Behind the stories of giants and prophets, of beautiful women and ugly murders, there emerged the account of a revolution which developed according to its own inherent laws, and which found its completion in the establishment of the state by David. But here was also a novel ...

A historical novel? But could the Bible be considered ancient history? Didn't its ideas and values influence people, even today, particularly today? Which parts of the David legend needed to be re-told in such a novel, which might the reader be expected to know? In general, was one obliged to stick to the Biblical report, and if so, to what extent? What language, what literary form did one choose to relate the tale?

(Heym 1973: 253)
Like Yonadab, Heym recognises the unique quality of this particular section of the Bible - the superior skill of its chronicler, the compelling nature of the material (the David of Heller's God Knows claims to have "the best story in the Bible" [Heller 1984: 10]); like Yonadab, he is aware of the reverberations caused by this narrative and of its continued influence over the lives of people; like Yonadab, he knows that the debate over the illustrious dead whose stories are contained therein is as controversial as ever. Unlike Yonadab, however, who wishes to inscribe his own name among their annals, Ethan's ambitions extend no further than negotiating a compromise between his natural respect for the truth as a conscientious historian and the need to omit anything that might incur the king's displeasure. Solomon requires a hagiography that will establish for this and all time to come One Truth, thus ending All Contradiction and Controversy, eliminating All Disbelief of the Choice by our Lord Yahveh of David ben Jesse, and allaying All Doubt of the Glorious Prophecies made to him by our Lord Yahveh in regard to his Seed and Progeny.

(Heym 1973: 9)

That there exists "disbelief" of the choice of David as the Lord's Anointed and "doubt" as to the prophecies regarding his successor is, however, hardly surprising, as Ethan's research and experience confirms. If the David of The Rape of Tamar is no angel (he is "a master of surprise and duplicity" and "could believe ... practically anything it suited him to believe" [Jacobson 1973: 15, 10]), Heym's David is a monster, a ruthless, hypocritical, murderous opportunist who served as a whore simultaneously to a king and the king's son and the king's daughter, who fought as a hired soldier against his own blood, who had his own son and most loyal servants assassinated while loudly bewailing their death, and who forged a people out of a motley of miserable peasants and recalcitrant nomads.

(Heym 1973: 11)
Expediency, rather than piety, is this David's guiding principle; he is a ruthless pragmatist, a Machiavellian. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli recommends that whenever new principalities are acquired, "the family line of the old prince must be extinguished" (Machiavelli 1987: 9). Although he composer powerful elegies for them and publicly laments their deaths, the political necessity of killing Saul and Jonathan and, later, Absalom, the subject of even more extravagant displays of grief - is undeniable. Similarly convenient for David is the manner of their deaths (they are killed in battle, expressly contrary to his publicly-proclaimed wishes), which recalls Machiavelli's precept that "princes must delegate distasteful tasks to others" (Machiavelli 1987: 63). It would take a feat of forgery equal to David's transformation of miscellaneous wild tribes into the people of Israel, Ethan soon realises, to produce a flattering portrait of Solomon's father.

During the meetings of the Royal Commission on the Preparation of the *Report*, Ethan presents the inconsistencies and ethical black spots that his sources reveal, for the consideration of Solomon's council of advisors. Their strategy is to be economical

33 David's attitude towards these deaths is rather like Bolingbroke's reaction to the news of Richard's murder at the end of *Richard II*: "Though I did wish him dead,/ I hate the murtherer, love him murthered" (*Richard II* V vi 39-40) - which itself echoes the reputed reaction of Henry II to the murder of Thomas Becket. Like Bolingbroke, David rewards the murderer of the deposed king by executing him and he orders Solomon to wreak vengeance on Joab for killing Absalom, instructing him to "let not his hoar head go down to the grave in peace" (I Kings 2: 6).

34 David goes on to kill all the other male members of the house of Saul (delivering them to the Gibeonites, who hang them in revenge for the slaughter that Saul inflicted on them), with the exception of Shimei (whom he also tells Solomon to kill, see I Kings 2: 9) and Mephibosheth (who is crippled and therefore represents no threat). Moreover, he destroys the documentation of Saul's reign, for, as Ethan puts it in an aphorism of the Machiavellian school, "a man who has his predecessor's last surviving male issue hanged must obliterate his memory as well" (Heym 1973: 17).
with the truth. At one of their meetings, there is a debate on how to present David's defection, while on the run from Saul, to the Philistines.

Jehoshaphat: King David rarely spoke of the affair; and when he did, he sounded as though he was not much troubled by it.
Nathan the prophet: And why should he have been? As the Chosen of the Lord, he had the duty to survive; for how else would God's will be done and David become King of Israel and father of King Solomon?
Zadok: You know it and I know it, but do the people know it? Might it not be wise to forget the whole thing? ...
Nathan: ... once we are agreed that David is the Chosen of the Lord, then everything he does is for the good of Israel. But as knowledge of the facts may lead a person to dangerous thoughts, the facts must be presented so as to direct the mind into the proper channels.
Zadok: That has been tried since the Lord God told Adam certain facts, back in Eden. The most excellent facts may be twisted by any serpent that comes along. (Heym 1973: 82)

For Nathan, the fact of David's annointment as the Lord's Chosen gives him carte blanche to do all that is necessary for his self-preservation, but as Zadok implies by invoking the relationship between God and Adam (his first choice, as it were), being Chosen does not absolve one from responsibility for one's actions. Indeed, the entire

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35 An episode that is omitted altogether in Chronicles, and rendered more palatable in I Samuel by the Philistine princes' curious (but, for David, convenient) objections to David's participation in the battle against Saul's army, "lest in the battle he be an adversary to us" (I Samuel 29: 4). Their misgivings are somewhat surprising bearing in mind the alacrity David had shown earlier in attacking (and slaughtering) the inhabitants of Judah - an episode that led Achish, the king of Gath, to remark: "He hath made his people Israel utterly to abhor him; therefore he shall be my servant forever" (I Samuel 28: 12).

36 The David of God Knows rails against this double bind:

Life as one of God's chosen has never been a bed of roses. Ask Adam, ask Eve. Give a look at what He did to Moses, at what happened to Saul ...

God does have this self-serving habit of of putting all blame for His own mistakes upon other people, doesn't He? He picks someone arbitrarily, unbidden, right out of the blue, so to speak, and levies upon him tasks of monumental
Old Testament is, in one sense, an exploration of the ambiguity of being the Chosen People, who, "while exulting over Yahveh's choice, and rejoicing in the discomfiture of their enemies, who had been passed over and rejected ... could never lose sight of the possibility that it might be their turn next to join the ranks of the rejected" (Jacobson 1982: 47). Solomon is in fact himself rejected, because he refuses to keep his covenant with Yahveh (although these events take place after the end of Heym's narrative, the novel is coloured by a kind of dramatic irony for those who are aware of this). David, in contrast, while utterly unscrupulous in betraying everyone (including his own people) when the occasion demands, is always careful to obtain (or at least appear to obtain) the sanction of Yahveh for his actions.

Even God's word is ultimately subject to political exigencies, however. As Benaiah notes (with approval, rather than satire):

> when it came to a clash between the word of the Lord and what David thought necessary, why, then, he would have a quick talk with the Lord, and somehow God changed his word to suit the needs of David.

(Heym 1973: 83)

The needs of Heller's David in *God Knows* hold similar sway with God.

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difficulty for which we don't always measure up in every particular, and then charges us for *His* error in selecting imperfectly.

(Heller 1984: 58)

The pronoun shift that takes place during the course of the last sentence of the passage quoted above ("he picks someone ... and levies upon him tasks ... for which we don't always measure up") illustrates David's desire to avoid personal responsibility for not having "measured up" - to see his personal failure as part of a larger, inevitable pattern of relations between man and God.
Believe it or not, God always seemed to reply whenever I talked to Him. I asked a question, He gave me a civil answer, inevitably supplying the one I wanted to receive. Our talks went smoothly. He never thundered at me as He did at Moses. He didn't even ask me to take off my shoes. If I wanted to know, I asked.

(Heller 1984: 187)

However, in the case of Heller's David this divine pliability makes him doubt the reliability of his own perceptions.

Without fail, the answers I received from Him were those I wanted to hear; and it often seemed I was talking just to myself.

(Heller 1984: 27)

Whereas Heym's David, an unscrupulous opportunist to whom self-doubt is absolutely alien, has no qualms about hearing only what he wants to hear from God, for Heller's David the possibility that his interlocutor is imaginary provokes an existential crisis, a crisis that is exacerbated when the voice falls silent. Whereas Heym's novel ends with the mere hint of deferred divine retribution for the sins of Solomon and his father, Heller's novel, narrated from his deathbed by an ailing King David, is suffused with the sad certainty that God has forever withdrawn his favour from the tribe of Jesse.

David's feud with God stems from the death of the child that Bathsheba conceives by him while still married to Uriah the Hittite. When Bathsheba becomes pregnant, David decides to have Uriah killed in battle, after his plan to pass off the child as Uriah's own is foiled by the foreigner's ironic insistence on observing the Mosaic law, which demands sexual abstinence on the part of a soldier at war. Stung by the injustice of the punishment (which a frenzied bout of prayer and penance does nothing to avert), David becomes embittered with God and ceases all attempt at communication, pending the apology that he feels he deserves.
At first, David is proud of his resolution and boasts that "God will have to make the first move if He wants to end this tension between us", but as the novel proceeds, God's silence weighs heavier with each page and the bravado ceases (Heller 1984: 51). Eventually, David admits that he is desperate to find a way "to end this long silence between me and the heavens without sacrificing my dignity" (Heller 1984: 54).

Latterly, David takes to constructing imaginary conversations with God. Musing over the naming of his heir - a decision that he has postponed throughout the course of the novel - he invokes God with an affection that belies the rage and bitterness that he has expressed elsewhere.

The dilemma I'm faced with is one I might enjoy talking over with God if I ever condescended to seek divine guidance again, for I can hear in my fancy the judgments I'd receive.

"Should I promise Adonijah the kingdom will be his?" I would inquire of God.
And He would say unto me, "Promise Adonijah."
"But should I promise Solomon also that I will let him be king?"
"Why not?" God would answer. "Say unto Solomon also that that you will let him be king."
... "But if I promise Adonijah that I will let him be king, and I promise Solomon also that I will let him be king, won't I have to break my promise to one or the other?"
"So?" saith the Lord. "You'll break your promise."

(Heller 1984: 335)

The Lord conjured up here is not the ruthless, humourless, brutal avenger who destroys David and Bathsheba's first child, but rather an avuncular, conspiratorially humorous - albeit cynical - confidant. It is the same God, albeit this time engaged in a less amiable conversation, who performs the role of phantom interlocutor in another imaginary dialogue a little later.
All I did was fuck another woman.
"And send her husband to his death," I can hear God correcting me as if we were on speaking terms again as we have been in the past.
"The Devil made me do it," I would remind Him in my defense.
"There's no such thing," He would argue in reply.
"The Garden of Eden?" And He'd say unto me, "That was a snake. You can look it up."

(Heller 1984: 338)

By this stage, then, David's yearning for the voice of God has clearly eclipsed his resentment; his longing to be reconciled with his Father has prevailed, as it does so often between renegade Jewish sons and unforgiving Jewish fathers. This longing also manifests itself in his increasing identification with that other surrogate father, Saul.

This identification begins with David's recognition that Saul had suffered a punishment as draconian as his own, for transgressing against the word of the Lord.

Saul's basic failing, I believe, was a parochial inability to understand that the same theocracy plucking him up from a hillside meadow to be ruler over Israel would be quick to disown him as soon as he began to reign like one. His offences were inconsequential. At Michmash, earlier, Saul performed the sacrifice when Samuel was late showing up. That wasn't his fault. When his men were famished, they ate meat with the blood. That wasn't his fault either, and he castigated them for having done so. And who but God could blame him for his failure to follow through on his curse and execute Jonathan?
For this you fire a king? Not in my book, even if I was the beneficiary.

(Heller 1984: 116)

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37 Smilesburger, in Roth's Operation Shylock, sees this relationship between the appeasing, rationalising son/man and the unappeasable, irrational father/God as the quintessential state of Jewishness:

A Jew knows God and how He operates. A Jew knows God and how, from the very first day He created man, He has been irritated with him from morning till night. That is what it means that the Jews are chosen ... To appeal to a crazy, irritated father, that is what it is to be a Jew.

(Roth 1993: 110)
What David fails to recall here, is that the initial decision to pluck Saul from rural obscurity - uniquely in the Bible as far as I am aware - is taken only after God heeds the will of the people, even though He appears to regard their request for a king as a personal slight.

Then all the elders of Israel gathered themselves together, and came to Samuel unto Ramah,
And said unto him, Behold, thou art old, and thy sons walk not in thy ways: now make us a king to judge us like all the nations.
But the thing displeased Samuel ... And Samuel prayed unto the Lord.
And the Lord said unto Samuel, Hearken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto thee: for they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them.

(I Samuel 8: 4-7)

In the light of this passage, the Lord's treatment of Saul is perhaps not simply an inexplicable example of excessively punitive behaviour, but a judgment on the blasphemous desire of the people to replace their heavenly king with an earthly one. Not just blasphemous, but assimilationist is this desire: the people of Israel want a king so that they can be "like all the nations"; by implication, they are rejecting their status as the Chosen people, reneging on their unique covenant with Yahveh. This interpretation is strengthened if we bear in mind the evolution (or rather disintegration), after David's death, of kingship (and of the kingdom of Israel which demanded its institution), as it unfolds in the rest of the book of Kings.

Throughout the novel, David emphasises the ambivalence of his feelings for his predecessor. Saul is both a father and a rival to him: protector and hunter, ally and adversary. On the one hand, he contrasts his own benign authority and paternal indulgence (wishing to spare Absalom's life, despite his rebellion) with Saul's tyrannical paranoia and parental cruelty (wishing to have Jonathan killed after his ignorant contravention of Saul's prohibition on food on the day of the battle of Michmash). At the same time, David reports Saul expressing the hope that "you never have from your
children the troubles I get from mine" (Heller 1984: 15), fully conscious of the irony. Just as Saul fights to preserve his throne against his son-in-law (and former favourite) David, the popular hero, so David fights Absalom, his favourite son and the people's champion. Most significantly for Heller's novel, however (and here he departs from the Bible), David's old age resembles Saul's, in that he has to endure the silence of God.

Lamenting the injustice of his treatment at the hands of Saul, David makes this equation very early on in the novel.

Wherever Saul sent me to fight, I went. And the better I was able to serve him in war against the Philistines, the greater grew his envious and furious suspicions that I was slated to replace him and was scheming already to do so. Was that fair? Was it my fault people liked me?

By that time, of course, Saul had been repudiated by Samuel and subjected by God to one of those vast and terrible metaphysical silences that only someone truly almighty and as indispensable as the Lord has the power to inflict. Here I can speak from personal experience: I no longer talk to Him, and He no longer talks to me.

(Heller 1984: 7)

That he should one day suffer the same arbitrary withdrawal of favour as Saul is something that never occurs to David in his earlier years. Even when he seeks out Samuel after being forced to flee from the wrath of Saul, and hears his humiliated confession that "God answereth me no more" (Heller 1984: 165), he never suspects that he might suffer the same fate. When he does, the consequences are severe. Above all, David needs to hear God's voice not to assure himself of God's existence, but of his own - or rather of both, for the two are symbiotic in David's understanding. As the Lord's annointed, whose raison d'être is to fulfil the divine will, he can only exist in so far as the Lord does. When he no longer hears - or thinks he hears - the voice of God, David loses his sense of purpose, his authority and, eventually, his sanity.
In this, too, David's story follows Saul's, for David sees Saul's madness as the direct result of God's refusal to talk to him.

He talked to God. He got no answer. Now there's a hollow state to be in, isn't it - to believe in God and get no sign that He's there. No wonder he went crazy.

(Heller 1984: 97)

David's identification with Saul reaches its apogee at the very end of the novel, when their identities actually merge. The process of self-alienation (which, in its extremest form, is precisely what madness is) - which we have seen evolve throughout the novel is completed in this final scene, when David - literally beside himself - becomes the other, and tries to slay the earlier self that appears before him.

I am thinking of God now, and I am thinking of Saul. I think of Saul in his wordless gloom and torment every time I came to his chamber to play for him, and I realize as I remember that I never saw a sadder face on human being [sic] until a little while ago, when Abishag the Shunnamite held a mirror up for me to see and I looked at mine.

It is almost night again. The skies of the desert are turning brown. In the pools of lamplight smoldering in the shadows I watch a vision slowly take shape. I see an eager, bright-eyed youth there on a wooden stool; then one bare knee of his is bent to the ground, and he is holding in his lap a lyre with eight strings. The apparition has come to play for me. He is ruddy, and withal of a goodly countenance, and very pleasant to look at. His neck is as a tower of ivory. His locks are bushy, and black as a raven, and his head is as most fine gold. I know him, of course, and thrill at the instant of recognition, at the sight of such healthy, vibrant, expectant beauty in a face that is mine. I can hardly wait for more. He starts with a song I used to know, in a clear, pure voice too sweet for a girl's and too young for a man's. His music is soothing, almost divine. I have never been so happy as when I hear him begin. And then I look around me for a javelin to hurl at his head.

(Heller 1984: 353)

This passage, with its steady accumulation of expectation, its protracted build-up towards a seemingly predetermined climax, suddenly wrenched at the end by the
unexpected twist, is a well-loved device of Heller's. The description of the young David is taken from his first appearance in the Bible, on the occasion of his anointment by Samuel, but subtly altered. Whereas the Bible has David as "ruddy and withal of a beautiful countenance, and goodly to look to" (I Samuel 16: 12), Heller's David describes his youthful self as having a "goodly countenance," emphasising the moral virtue that is revealed in the boy's physiognomy, in order to make his Saul-like urge to kill him at once more perverse and more understandable. For what the older David cannot abide about this younger version of himself - what Saul also could not abide - is the painful contrast between his younger self's goodness and his own corruption, the boy's innocent belief in his own goodness, and his own embittered knowledge of its hollowness.

38 Compare, for example, this earlier passage describing David's confrontation with Goliath.

Casting my staff away when I was less than fifty paces off, I rushed toward him without warning, running at him in a straight line as fleetly as I could and lifting my sling above my head with an accelerating momentum greater than any I had ever been able to muster before in my whole life. The mass of the stone in the hollow of my sling seemed to double in weight by the second. Goliath stood riveted in place like something inanimate, his mouth gaping. I felt wonderful. Who could put it into words? The mounting pull on my muscles of the centrifugal force I was generating was more exquisite in its pleasure than any sensation I had ever experienced or could possibly have dreamed of. An intoxication of overconfidence brought me nearer and nearer, and my reason was in peril of being swept away. Fortunately, I took hold of myself. Thirty paces was about near enough, I decided, and skidded to a stop when I was already closer than that, digging my legs in for my throw. It was with all my strength that I brought my arm about the next two times. I took dead aim at the dark hole of the open mouth between his huge repulsive teeth. Coming around on my final spin, I let slip the loop from my thumb. I felt my shot unroll with the sling and fly from the pocket without the slightest waver, and I knew in my bones that there was really no way I could possibly miss. I missed.

(Heller 1984: 74)
Earlier in the novel, David comments on this painful discrepancy between youthful idealism and elderly cynicism:

Those were my salad days, when I was green in judgment, and I believed in a great number of things about which I'm skeptical now. I believed in the future. I still believed in God. I even believed in Saul. I have had three fathers in my life - Jesse, Saul, and God. All three have disappointed me. I have lived without God a long time now, and probably I can learn to die without Him too.

(Heller 1984: 73)

This passage strikes the key-note in the novel. It is a novel about fatherhood, about man's relationship to God, about disillusionment and death, about self-alienation, and about authority. David's disappointment in his fathers is matched by his disappointment in his sons. He is betrayed by Absalom - his favourite - as well as by Amnon and Adonijah; his first son with Bathsheba dies soon after his birth and his successor, Solomon is a hapless schlemiel who insists on writing down all that David tells him, but is incapable of understanding the simplest instructions. Moreover, like the Solomon of The King David Report, he is a shameless plagiarist (in this novel, he pilfers The Song of Solomon from David himself).

However, Solomon is not the only plagiarist at whose hands David will suffer. There is also William Shakespeare, whom David judges an

overrated hack ... whose chief genius lay in looting the best thoughts and lines from works of Kit Marlowe, Thomas Kyd, Plutarch, Raphael Holinshed, and me. The idea for King Lear, of course, he got from me and Absalom. Are you going to tell me no? Do you think the unscrupulous plagiarist could have written Macbeth had he never heard of Saul?

(Heller 1984: 65)

Later on, he returns to this theme.
Where would Shakespeare have been without me? Who was it who loved not wisely but too well? Me and Bathsheba, or Othello and that wop?

(Heller 1984: 202)

And again, when he is captured and brought before Achish, the king of Gath, David soon realises that extreme measures are required if he is to escape with his life.

They talked of blinding me and then of cutting off my thumbs and my big toes. I laid up these words in my heart and was sore afraid. I was not in a good bargaining position, and could see that in one way or another I would have to change my behavior. So on the spot I decided to put on an antic disposition and stake everything on the effect. Where do you think Shakespeare really got the idea for Hamlet?

(Heller 1984: 175)

There are other parts of David's life which might have provided Shakespeare with a few ideas - his defection to the Philistines, for example, which, as Gabriel Josipovoci points out, in The Book of God, is a "Coriolanus-type action" (Josipovoci 1988: 201), but the point is that when David speaks above of his salad days, he is not simply quoting Shakespeare, he is engaging in a struggle for literary authority, a process of retrieval and reattribution that continues throughout the novel.

Anticipating charges of barbarity for his decapitation of Goliath, David reminds the reader of the Philistine treatment of Saul and his sons.

They fastened Saul's head in their temple of Dagon. And nailed all the rest of the four bodies to the outer wall of their bastion city of Bethshan ... Compared to that, I was too full of the milk of human kindness.

(Heller 1984: 102)

Lamenting the ingratitude of his children, David tells us, "It's so much sharper than a serpent's tooth to have a thankless child" (Heller 1984: 26). Responding indignantly to rumours of a homosexual liason with Jonathan, David observes that
good name in man or woman is the immediate jewel of their soul. A good name is better than precious ointment. He who steals my purse steals trash, but he that filches from me my good name robs me of that which not enriches him, and makes me poor indeed, and I wish I could set the record straight on this matter of Jonathan and me once and for all.

(Heller 1984: 95)

Extenuating his designs on Saul's crown, David assures us that he thought of the possibility of becoming king only "with the airiness of an adolescent fancy rather than the constancy of a vaulting ambition that might someday overleap itself" (Heller 1984: 126). Replying to David's inquiry as to how he will earn the right to marry Michal, Abner refers enigmatically to Saul's demand for a hundred Philistine foreskins: "With a pound of flesh" (Heller 1984: 132). Bemoaning the fact that he has no book named after him in the Bible, David acknowledges that "fame is the spur that the clear spirit doth raise, and I don't give up hoping" (Heller 1984: 146). Of his generous elegy to Saul, David explains that

The good that men do lives after them, while the evil is oft interred with their bones. So let it be with Saul, I decided, and made no mention at all of his killing of the priests, that bloody nut, and his occasional spells of looniness with the prophets.

(Heller 1984: 146)

Seeking out Samuel for advice after Saul's murderous designs become clear, David finds the prophet less than pleased to see him. When David suggests that he accompany him in his flight to Naioth, Samuel demurs: "I know trouble when I see it. Goodbye, goodbye, parting is such sweet sorrow, but not from you" (Heller 1984: 163).

When Abishai reproaches David for refusing to despatch the sleeping Saul while he had the chance, David responds: "I thought he reminded me of my father as he slept" (Heller 1984: 192). Of Abigail, David remarks that "She was afraid of the dark, but her voice was ever soft, an excellent thing in woman" (Heller 1984: 209). When
Saul goes to consult the wise woman of Endor, she greets him with "'Double, double, toil and trouble'" (Heller 1984: 214). Paying tribute to Bathsheba, David avers that "Other women cloy the appetites they feed, but Bathsheba made hungry where most she satisfied" (Heller 1984: 249). Luxuriating post-coitally in the splendour of the King's rooms, Bathsheba exclaims, "Let me live in here with you. Make me your queen. You won't be sorry. I'll do such things to you - I know not what they are" (Heller 1984: 269). When the first-born of Bathsheba dies (as punishment for David's treatment of Uriah), he laments "He'll come no more, never, never, never" (Heller 1984: 288). Of Amnon's treatment of Tamar, David has this to say:

Since Leviticus, a man is forbidden to lie with the daughter of his father's wife, but I would have said yes had his intentions been reputable and and he'd asked to marry her. Such laws often are more honored in the breach than in the observance, and I would have looked the other way and danced at their wedding. (Heller 1984: 297)

Commenting on Absalom's patience in deferring his revenge on Amnon, David observes that "he smiled and smiled for two full years and still was a villain" (Heller 1984: 303). When Absalom launches his rebellion, David feels "more sinned against than sinning" (Heller 1984: 314). After bitterly confronting Joab over his disobedience in killing Absalom, "The rest was silence" (Heller 1984: 331). Resisting Bathsheba's demands that he names Solomon as his successor, David tells her "'There's a divinity that shapes our ends ... rough-hew them how we will, and all our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death'" (Heller 1984: 341).

The cumulative effect of these quotations is precisely the opposite of the learned allusions in Roth's and Bellow's novels, in which the protagonists comically attempt to mythologise themselves through association with a pantheon of literary and legendary figures. Here, David *is* one of these legendary figures, and his liberal borrowings from (and manglings of) the legendary lines of Shakespeare illustrate the extent to which his
own life, like these lines, has been anthologised and popularised, his very existence distorted; fragmented and appropriated, piecemeal, by others. God Knows is, in a sense, an attempt on the part of David to repossess his story (a story that has been bowdlerised and vulgarised, a story that has entered into and been devalued by, common usage, in the same way as many of Shakespeare's greatest lines of poetry), to reclaim his authority over the narrative of his life.

On several different occasions during the novel, David finds that when he refers to his victory over Goliath (the episode for which he is most famous today) and to other personal landmarks, he is met with bemused ignorance, so that he wonders about the authority of the story and about whether his own experience has any objective

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39 Part of the reason for this popularisation of the David story (or, rather, parts of it) undoubtedly lies in his early status as an underdog; in the improbable romance of his youthful triumphs. When Samuel visits the house of Jesse in search of God's Chosen, no one thinks for a moment of the youngest son, out tending sheep, as the intended vessel of divine will (even the normally prescient Samuel is deceived by appearances). When Goliath is taunting the collective might of the Hebrew army into shamed silence with his challenge of single combat, no one (least of all Goliath) takes seriously the shepherd boy with his sling. When David is set the Herculean task of obtaining a hundred Philistine foreskins in return for the hand of the princess Michal, no one expects him to return alive, let alone with an extra hundred for good measure. All these stories from David's early career have the aura of fairy-tales; the neglected youngest son, scorned by his elder brothers (who reprimand him for his "pride and the naughtiness of [his] heart" when he asks why no one is prepared to challenge Goliath [I Samuel 17: 28]), is marked out for great expectations by the most respected man in the land, defeats the ogre, and marries the princess. Yet if his rise to fame sees David cast as the archetypal romantic hero - brave, handsome and loved by all (the people already mythologising him in song: "Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands" [I Samuel 18: 7]) - his later career finds him more suited to the role of tyrant. Hence, the strong bias towards these halcyon years in the popular mythology of David - a bias that Heller tries to redress by having his king narrate his life-story from his death-bed, bereft not only of his God, but also of his favourite wife and favourite son.

I have really not felt much of anything since my wife Abigail died and my son Absalom betrayed me and was killed.

(Heller 1984: 337)
validity. As we have seen, the silence of God in his later years excites the most profound ontological anxiety in David (indeed there is a moment when David fears that his world has become wholly solipsistic and asks himself "Do I imagine Abishag the Shunnamite, construct her out of wishes?") but there are hints of similar anxiety long before this (Heller 1984: 107). As a forlorn fugitive, forced into exile by the homicidal intentions of Saul, and having just escaped death at the hands of another king (Achish) by feigning madness, David spends a troubled night out in the open, on the outskirts of Gath.

Eventually, I slept, and my lashes were stuck together with tears I shed while I slumbered. When I awoke, my head was filled with dew and my locks with the drops of the earth. At once I felt worse. Watching the morn in russet mantle clad creep o'er the hills, I felt my heart die within me as I realized suddenly that just about no one ever mentioned Goliath anymore, neither Philistine nor Israelite, and I began to wonder if the day of my killing him had ever really taken place.

(Heller 1984: 178)

The incorporation of the famous lyric description of dawn from Hamlet at this moment of extreme self-doubt (in the most literal, as well as figurative sense) is not facetious; it reinforces David's sense that all stories, all authority, is unstable, vulnerable to revision, distortion or extinction. The antiphonal structure of the prose, too - with its lyrical, biblical cadences ("When I awoke, my head was filled with dew and my locks with the drops of the earth") answered by prosaic, colloquial rhythms ("At once I felt worse") - is not simply comically incongruous. Rather, Heller's self-conscious yoking of biblical materials with contemporary sensibilities represents his attempt to come to terms with his own Jewish literary ancestry and to draw on, while at the same time challenging, its authority.

40 There are moments when Heller is facetious, however. For example, the passage in which Joab accusses David of lisping.

"Why were you lisping?" he demanded angrily.
Philip Roth and the Jewish Other: The Question of Authenticity

Although (or perhaps because) he has received more criticism - some of it invective - from the Jewish community than any other Jewish writer, Roth readily

"Lisping?" I was baffled. "Who was lisping?"
"You were."
"When?"
"Before."
"Lisping?" I repeated in disbelief. "What are you talking about? I wasn't lisping. I never lisp."
"You said pisseth, didn't you?"
"Pisseth?"
"That's right. You thaid all who pisseth against the wall."
"I thaid pisseth?" I was furious now and answered him with a heat that equalled his own. "I thaid no thuch thing."
"Yeth, you did. Akth anyone."
"Let'th get these provisions moving, Joab, before they thpoil in the sun. I command thee. Pisseth? Indeed!"

(Heller 1984: 197)

Or the response that David gives to the tirade of abuse hurled at him by Shimei.

"Come out, come out, thou bloody man, and thou man of Belial. The Lord hath returned upon thee all the blood of the house of Saul, in whose stead thou hast reigned. And the Lord hath delivered the kingdom into the hand of Absalom thy son. And behold, thou art taken in thy mischief, because thou art a bloody man."

You think I understood everything he was talking about? Blame it on those translators of King James the First.

(Heller 1984: 318)

These jokes are regrettable, because they are inconsistent with the usual acceptance (and skilful deployment) of the language of the Authorised Version language as part of the novel's contrapuntal linguistic structure (which mingle modern colloquialisms with biblical cadences).
acknowledges the importance of his Jewish patrimony to his work.\textsuperscript{41} Like Bellow, Roth emphasises that his early literary influences were American ("I was, at sixteen and seventeen, strongly under the sway of Thomas Wolfe ... I'd read Sinclair Lewis and Sherwood Anderson and Mark Twain ... " [Roth 1985b: 122-3]). As a mature writer, however, Roth has cited as influences on his work two Jews - Kafka and Bruno Schulz - who, although they "could barely identify [themselves] with reality, let alone with the Jews," nevertheless seem to many to be quintessentially Jewish.\textsuperscript{42} He has also professed his admiration for, and formed friendships with, Jewish contemporaries such as Bellow (the dedicatee of \textit{Reading Myself and Others}), Malamud, Singer, Aharon Appelfeld and the painter R.B. Kitaj. Like Kitaj, Roth's work has become increasingly confessional and increasingly concerned with questions of Jewish identity in recent years.

Like Bellow and Heller, Roth chafes at the idea of being bracketed as a Jewish writer and dismisses the idea of belonging to a school of American-Jewish writing.

\textsuperscript{41} Irving Howe, himself the author of one of the most vituperative of attacks on Roth ("Philip Roth Reconsidered," published in 1972), remarks that "some of them [rabbis] made a virtual career out of attacking his work" (Howe 1983: 259).

\textsuperscript{42} Roth is speaking of Schulz here, but his words seem to apply equally well to Kafka, who famously wrote:

\begin{quote}
What have I in common with Jews? I have hardly anything in common with myself and should stand very quietly in a corner, content that I should breathe.
\end{quote}

(quoted in Malin 1973: 58)

It was of course Roth's interest in Kafka which inspired him to visit Czechoslovakia, a visit that precipitated a keen interest in Eastern European writers and led to Roth becoming General Editor of Penguin's "Writers From the Other Europe" series, in which Schulz's stories first became available in English translation. Schulz's reputation has since burgeoned, aided by Theatre Complicite's highly-acclaimed stage-adaptation of his work, \textit{Street of Crocodiles}. 
If we [Bellow, Malamud and Roth] constitute a Jewish school, it is only in the odd sense of having each found his own means of transcending the immediate parochialism of his Jewish background and transforming what had once been the imaginative property of anecdotal local colorists ... into a fiction having entirely different intentions, but which nonetheless remains grounded in the colorful specificity of the locale.

(Roth 1985b: 126)

In an interview with the Sunday Times, in 1984, he plays down the importance of Zuckerman's Jewishness, saying "My trilogy is about the vocation of an American writer, who is a Jew to boot" (Roth 1985b: 131). In a subsequent interview in the Paris Review, he elaborates on this.

Zuckerman's struggle with Jewishness and Jewish criticism is seen in the context of his comical career as an American writer ... The Jewish quality of books like mine doesn't really reside in their subject matter ... It's a kind of sensibility ... the nervousness, the excitability, the arguing, the dramatising, the indignation, the obsessiveness, the touchiness, the play-acting - above all the talking.

(Roth 1985b: 162)

Later on in the same interview, Roth has this to say about The Ghost Writer.

The difficulties of telling a Jewish story - How should it be told? In what tone? To whom should it be told? To what end? Should it be told at all? - was finally to become The Ghost Writer's theme.

(Roth 1985b: 166)

In this progression - from initially implying that Zuckerman's Jewishness is purely incidental, to acknowledging that there is an identifiable Jewish sensibility in the Zuckerman novels, to defining the theme of the first novel in this series as "The difficulties of telling a Jewish story" - we can see that Jewish sensibility at work, a sensibility characterised above all by its continual need - the one attribute that Roth omits from his list - to explain itself.
Historically, such explanations have been necessary defensive measures for Jewish writers anxious to placate, and find acceptance with, an anti-Semitic Gentile audience. For Roth, however, anxiety over the Jewishness of his discourse springs not from the prejudice of Gentiles, but from the accusations of self-hatred and betrayal from his fellow Jews.

In a conversation with Issac Bashevis Singer on Bruno Schulz, Roth asks the nobel-prize winner about Jewish critical responses to his work and Singer complains:

they [some critics] said, "Why do you write about Jewish thieves and Jewish prostitutes?" And I said, "Shall I write about Spanish thieves and Spanish prostitutes? I write about the thieves and prostitutes that I know".

(Roth 1977a: 14)

This summarises Roth's own position rather well; indeed, it closely echoes the terms of the debate that surrounded Roth's early short story, "Epstein", about an adulterous episode in the life of a middle-aged Jewish businessman. In Reading Myself and Others, Roth answers the criticism of a Jewish reader, who asks, in an irate letter to the author, whether adultery is a Jewish trait, by observing:

Anna Karenina commits adultery with Vronsky, with consequences more disastrous than those Epstein brings about. Who thinks to ask, "Is it a Russian trait?"

(Roth 1985b: 208)

Characteristically, Roth invokes a great literary precedent to justify his own fictional practice and, indeed, Roth's tone when dealing with this sort of criticism in Reading Myself and Others is often that of the embattled high-minded artist who would really rather not be wasting his time with these simple-minded attacks. The more mature Roth of The Facts, however, acknowledges that "the angry Jewish
resistance that I aroused virtually from the start - was the luckiest break I could have had" (Roth 1988a: 130).

Called to account for himself as a writer and a Jew, Roth responds by launching possibly the most sustained and unstinting self-inquiry in modern fiction, repeatedly placing himself in the dock and prosecuting himself in his fiction with even greater gusto than that with which he defends himself outside it. It is as though, frustrated by the ineptitude of the attacks on him and yet fascinated by the potential for dramatic conflict that they suggest, he feels compelled to rewrite them, to do justice fictionally to the idea of the writer at odds with his community, his family and himself. In doing so, Roth creates what is almost a new genre of writing: fiction as self-accusation.

In *The Ghost Writer*, Nathan Zuckerman, surveying E. I. Lonoff's short stories, comments that the ones he most admires are those in which "the pitiless author seems to me to teeter just at the edge of self-impalement" (Roth 1979: 14). In his previous novel, *The Professor of Desire*, David Kepesh, the devotee of earnest moral literature, asks Ralph Baumgarten, the writer to whose "blend of shameless erotomania, microscopic fetishism, and rather dazzling imperiousness" he finds himself irresistibly drawn, why he has never written about his family (Roth 1978: 137).

"spare me the subject of the Jewish family and its travails. Can you actually get worked up over another son and another daughter and another mother and another father driving each other nuts? ... Has it not been done - and done? ... For me the books count ... where the writer incriminates himself." (Roth 1978: 138-9)

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43 The number of fantasy trials that Roth's heroes undergo bears testimony to this self-adversarial stance. There are mock-court scenes in which the hero is indicted in *Portnoy's Complaint*, in *My Life As a Man* and in *Deception*, as well as numerous - as it were unofficial - trials, such as that undergone by Nathan Zuckerman at the hands of his brother's fellow Yeshiva students in *The Counterlife*. 
Roth's achievement has been to transform the conventional sentimental treatment of "the subject of the Jewish family and its travails" into a fiction of self-impalement and self-incrimination. Baumgarten and Lonoff, who, on the face of it, represent the two extremes in Jewish-American fiction (the self-aggrandising, aggressive, amoral hedonist and the self-deprecating, reclusive, moral ascetic), have this trait in common and their roles as surrogate brother/father - as alter-egos to the narrator-heroes, living counter-lives that attract and repel in equal measure - anticipate the subsequent development of what I will call the Jewish Other in Roth's work.

Since these two final novels of the seventies, Roth's preoccupation with questions of authentic Jewishness (is there such a thing? how can it be achieved? where can it be achieved? is it worth achieving?) has become predominant. Surveying the whole gamut of Jewry (from the fanatically orthodox to the aggressively secular, from the militant Zionist to the radical Diasporist), Roth is engaged in these novels in a quest for quintessential Jewhood - something like the state that Zuckerman finds himself in at the close of The Counterlife: "A Jew without Jews ... without Jewishness ... just the object itself, like a glass or an apple" (Roth 1987: 328). The Jewish protagonists of these novels are locked in protracted debates with other Jews, or rather (as these characters tend to represent suppressed facets - alternative versions - of themselves) with Jewish Others, over these questions.

Whereas Baumgarten and Lonoff are older writers and potential role-models for Kepesh and Zuckerman, the more recent Jewish Others are often would-be, amateur writers, whose role-models are the heroes of the novels, and whose literary ambitions (although usually half-baked and half-cocked) culminate in struggles for authority that revolve around struggles for authenticity. To write or be written, to imagine or be

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44 I think the analogy Roth has in mind here is with an artist's still life study.
imagined, to be real or be realised, to be a Jew or not to be - these are the challenges posed to the late-Roth hero by his Jewish Others.

Alvin Pepler is the first of these rival authors, rival Jews, rival selves. Pepler introduces himself at the beginning of Zuckerman Unbound as a fan of Zuckerman's, flattering him with comparisons with Marcel Proust and Stephen Crane. Soon, he is claiming kinship as a fellow Newarker and, what's more, a fellow writer.

This is probably going to make you laugh. But I'm trying to write myself. You don't have to worry about the competition, I assure you. (Roth 1981: 15)

The subject of Pepler's book, it turns out, is the television quiz show scandal of the late fifties (into which, Alex informs us in Portnoy's Complaint, he had led the investigation), in which it emerged that answers were being fed to contestants in advance. Pepler claims that he had vigorously opposed this rigging and has been unfairly vilified (his desire to "write myself" is also a desire to right himself). His book is to be an attempt not merely to vindicate his own reputation, but, more importantly, that of the Jews, whose representative Pepler claims to have been while appearing on "Smart Money".45

"I wouldn't dream ... of comparing the two of us. An educated artist like yourself and a person who happens to have been born with a photographic memory are two different things entirely. But while I was on 'Smart Money', deservedly or not I had the respect of the entire nation. If I have to say so myself, I don't think it did the Jewish people any harm having a Marine veteran of two wars representing them on prime-time national television for three consecutive weeks. I made no

45 In Robert Redford's acclaimed film, Quiz Show, based on the real-life scandal, the racial element of the fixing (the urbane, charming WASP professor, Charles Van Doren, is granted a much longer run of success than the awkward, gawky Jew Herb Stempel) is highlighted. The latter's apparently paranoid claims that Gentiles are always favoured turns out to be entirely justified, and the extra twist is provided by the fact that the investigating attorney is also Jewish.
bones about my religion. I said it right out. I wanted the country to know that a
Jew in the Marine Corps could be as tough on the battlefield as anyone ... if I
could write a publishable book ... Whoever innocent I harmed and left besmirched,
all the millions I let down, Jews particularly - well, they would finally understand
the truth of what happened. They would forgive me."

(Roth 1981: 146-7)

Pepler's disavowal of any intended parallel between himself and Zuckerman is, of
course, completely disingenuous. As someone who has himself been unjustly accused
of besmirching the reputation of Jews, Zuckerman will, Pepler hopes, sympathise with
his plight. The difference, however, is not merely one of intellectual pedigree
(Zuckerman as the representative of high-brow Jewish culture, Pepler of low-brow) -
as Pepler implies - but of identification with Jewishness. Zuckerman has never seen
himself, or asked to be seen, as representing Jews, whereas Pepler is, by self-
appointment, not simply an individual game-show contestant, but The Jew. Malamud
once wrote that if a Jew ever forgets he is a Jew, a Gentile will remind him (Heller uses
this as one of the epigraphs to Good As Gold), but in Roth's novels, if a Jew ever
forgets he is a Jew, it is a fellow Jew who will remind him. Pepler is making an appeal
for sympathy on the basis of a shared background in much the same way as Sheldon
Grossbart tries to elicit preferential treatment from his superior officer Nathan Marx, in
Roth's early story, "Defender of the Faith", by appealing to clan loyalty.

Later, Pepler shows Zuckerman a piece of "literary criticism" that he has written
and asks for his opinion (Roth 1981: 145). It turns out to be the beginning of a review
of Carnovsky, the novel that has propelled Zuckerman to fame ("in many ways that
Reluctantly bowing to Pepler's insistence on candour, Zuckerman wonders whether
"it's worth the effort" (Roth 1981: 154). Stung into like-minded candour, Pepler
launches into a diatribe, accusing his erstwhile literary hero of sentimentalising Newark
and culminating in the accusation that Zuckerman has "stolen" his life.
"From what my Aunt Lottie told your cousin Essie that she told to your mother that she told to you. About me. About my past."

(Roth 1981: 155)

The thin line between adulation and abomination has been crossed; what appeared to be praise for the verisimilitude of Zuckerman's novel is revealed as resentment for his (supposed) appropriation of Pepler's own biography. Musing over this incident in his notebook (typically, Zuckerman cannot resist explaining his run-in with Pepler in literary terms - subjecting his life to his own brand of literary criticism), Zuckerman writes


(Roth 1981: 159)

Zuckerman's interpretive emphasis falls on Pepler's Jewishness ("Tribal retribution") and on his literary pretensions (the allusion to Conrad's "Secret Sharer", momentarily granting dignity to Pepler's claim to kinship, is swiftly deflated by the comical, quasi-oxymoronic phrase "pop self") - the characteristic battlegrounds for the Rothian hero and his Jewish Other. In Sartrean terms, Pepler is more authentic than Zuckerman, because he "asserts his claim in the face of the disdain shown toward him", whereas Zuckerman does not trumpet his Jewishness (Sartre 1948: 91). In the sense that Lionel Trilling defines it in Sincerity and Authenticity, however, Zuckerman is truly authentic. For Trilling, authenticity involves

a more strenuous moral experience than 'sincerity' does, a more exigent conception of the self and of what being true to it consists in ... The concept of authenticity can deny art itself, yet at the same time it figures as the dark source of art.

(Trilling 1972: 11)
For Zuckerman, as much as for Trilling, the index of values against which the self must be measured - and according to which the self must be defined - is the Jamesian literary one of moral exigencies, intellectual paradoxes (such as Trilling's notion of authenticity both denying and inspiring art) and "the madness of art", rather than the ethnic one invoked by Pepler and Sartre.\(^4\) Zuckerman's authenticity is the authenticity of the writer, Pepler's the authenticity of the Jew (and it is revealing that Trilling, himself a Jew and a writer, should define authenticity in terms of artistic creation) and whereas Pepler calls Zuckerman to account for his Jewishness and finds him wanting, Zuckerman calls Pepler to account for his writing and forms an equally harsh judgment.

The struggle between vulgar reality and refined art - and between the two types of authenticity, between the writer and the Jew - continues unresolved, however. Towards the end of the novel - having become convinced that Pepler is responsible for the series of bizarre and abusive phone calls which culminate in the threat to kidnap his mother, and which cease after his father's death - Zuckerman speculates

Was that the end of this barrage? Or would Zuckerman's imagination beget still other Peplers conjuring up novels out of his - novels disguising themselves as actuality itself, as nothing less than real?

(Roth 1981: 198)

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\(^4\) The phrase "the madness of art" appears in James' short story "The Middle Years" and is part of a passage that E. I. Lonoff types out and places over his desk in *The Ghost Writer*.

"We work in the dark - we do what we can - we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art."

(Roth 1979: 77)
This passage anticipates directly the themes of *Operation Shylock* (a work which might be a novel presenting itself as actuality, or reality disguising itself as fiction) and indeed the Roth/Pipik confrontation in that novel echoes the Zuckerman/Pepler relationship in many ways.

In the later novel, however, it is "Roth" whose life - and name - is "stolen" by an imposter.47 "Roth" it is, too, who disguises his voice and phones up his Other, in a bid to discover the truth of the rumours that have reached him from Israel of a man bearing his name, preaching the strange doctrine of "Diasporism" - a sort of counter-Zionism that advocates the repatriation of all Ashkenazi Jews to their European homelands. This impostor is the quintessential Rothian Jewish Other: not only does he claim to be the hero and thus to reconstitute his Jewishness, he also proposes an alternative - or other - destiny for the Jewish people at large.

When "Roth" first confronts Pipik (as he later calls him), the latter's approach is very similar to Pepler's - that of the star-struck fan. He greets his hero with a stream of effusive, barely coherent exclamations.

"I can't tell you what it's like for me! In Israel! In Jerusalem! I don't know what to say! I don't know where to begin! The books! Those books! I go back to *Letting Go*, my favorite to this day! ... Your women! Ann! Barbara! Claire! Such terrific women! I'm sorry, but imagine yourself in my place."

(Roth 1993: 71)

47 The idea of presenting himself as the protagonist of his own novel may have come from the Polish author, Tadeusz Konwicki, one of the authors published in the Penguin "Writers from the Other Europe" series of which Roth was the General Editor. In an interview with Hermione Lee in 1984, Roth commented on Konwicki's strategy of introducing a character bearing his own name into one of his novels: "He strengthens the illusion that the novel is true - and not to be discounted as 'fiction' - by impersonating himself" (Roth 1992: 168).

In order to preserve the distinctions between Roth the author and Roth the character, the latter will be distinguished typographically through the use of inverted commas. The imposter Roth will always be referred to by the nick-name given him by "Roth": Moishe Pipik.
Pipik's enthusiasm is not feigned and his claim to be "Roth's" "greatest admirer" ("I know your life inside out. I could be your biographer. I am your biographer") is no idle one (Roth 1993: 73). His knowledge of the author's life and career is encyclopaedic, his admiration boundless (if Pipik were "Roth's" biographer, he would produce a hagiography); his apologetic invitation to "imagine yourself in my place" is entirely ingenuous. "Roth" proceeds to do just this, however. Finding himself mistaken - by his old friend George Ziad and by an enigmatic elderly disciple of Pipik's, Smilesburger - for the father of Diasporism, he plays along, impersonating his own impersonator.48 When he discusses his plight with his friend, the Israeli novelist Aharon Appelfeld, Appelfeld concludes that the vehemence of Roth's anger is due not so much to the audacity of Pipik's fraud, but to its inauthenticity (in the Trillingian sense) - to the inadequacy of Pipik's assumption of the novelist's prerogative.

"He has less talent for impersonating you than you have - maybe that's the irritation. Substitute selves? Alter egos? The writer's medium. It's all too shallow and too porous for you, without the proper weight and substance. Is this the double that is going to be my own? An aesthetic outrage. The great wonders performed on the golem by Rabbi Liva of Prague you are now going to perform on him. Why? Because you have a better conception of him than he does ... You are going to rewrite him."

(Roth 1993: 107)

48 This impromptu impersonation also has a precedent in the Zuckerman novels. In The Anatomy Lesson, Zuckerman pretends to be Milton Appel, a critical adversary and adversarial critic (and yet another Jewish Other - Appel's criticism of Zuckerman's work is motivated - at least according to Zuckerman's own interpretation - by guilt at his own youthful rejection of his Jewish heritage) and reinvents him as the editor of a pornographic magazine, Lickety Split. This improvisation is at least partly fuelled by the cocktail of drink and drugs that Zuckerman is taking to subdue the raging pain in his neck - another link with Operation Shylock, whose fantastic narrative may originate in the hallucinatory effects of the subsequently-banned (in America) sleeping-pill, Halcion, to which "Roth" is unwittingly addicted at the start of the novel.
Like Pepler, Pipik submits a sample of his own prose for his hero's inspection (in the case of Pipik, the Ten Tenets of his organisation for curing anti-Semitism - Anti-Semites Anonymous), which "Roth" literally rewrites, but, as Appelfeld implies, it is the larger project - that of rewriting Pipik's life - that inevitably attracts the author. If Pipik is an amateur chronicler of "Roth's" life, "Roth" becomes the professional chronicler of Pipik's, so that in a sense the novel itself is the author's revenge on his Other. "Other" is indeed, in the eyes of "Roth," a more appropriate term for Pipik's relationship to the author than Appelfeld's "double" precisely because of this distinction between professionalism and amateurism, between the vocational imagination of the artist and the opportunistic imagination of the dilettante.

To think of him as a double was to bestow on him the destructive status of a famously real and prestigious archetype, and impostor was no improvement; it only intensified the menace I'd conceded with the Dostoyevskian epithet by imputing professional credentials in duplicitous cunning to this ... this what?

(Roth 1993: 115)

This is the moment when "Roth" names his impersonator Moishe Pipik.

The derogatory, joking nonsense name that translates literally to Moses Bellybutton and that probably connoted something slightly different to every Jewish family on our block - the little guy who wants to be a big shot, the kid who pisses in his pants, the someone who is a bit ridiculous, a bit funny, a bit childish, the comical shadow alongside whom we had all grown up, that little folkloric fall guy whose surname somehow designated the thing that for most children was neither here nor there, neither a part nor an orifice, somehow a concavity and a convexity both, something neither upper nor lower, neither lewd nor entirely respectable either, a short enough distance from the genitals to make it suspiciously intriguing and yet, despite this teasing proximity, this conspicuously puzzling centrality, as meaningless as it was without function ...

(Roth 1993: 116)

This extravagant passage, moving from an explanation of the derivation of the nonsense-name to a comic tour de force on the perplexing nebulosity of the
bellybutton, is typical of the way that Roth's imagination works. Whereas Dostoyevsky and Edgar Allen Poe find in the usurpation of identity a subject for metaphysical terror, Roth (like Mark Twain and Plautus) turns it into a subject for metaphysical comedy. Pipik's character is vague, blurred, insufficiently realised, so "Roth" invests him with the vividness of a folkloric figure - and one whose very distinguishing feature is his comical indistinctness, and indistinction. The association of this would-be Jewish visionary with the comic butt of Jewish childhood - "the little guy who wants to be a big shot" - is also a shrewdly disabling tactic in the battle for supremacy that develops between the two rival Roths.

Having discovered that "Roth" has accepted a check for a million dollars from Smilesburger (a donation to the Diasporist cause) in his name, Pipik angrily confronts the author and demands its return. Like Pepler, Pipik appeals to his hero not on his own behalf, but as a representative of all Jews ("You're not stealing from me stealing that check ... you're stealing from the Jewish people" [Roth 1993: 183]). What galls him more than the purloining of his check, however, is the discovery of his hero's nickname for him. Once he hears this, the reverence that he had shown at the start of the novel vanishes forever, to be replaced by contempt (like Pepler's attitude towards Zuckerman: both Pepler and Pipik are true companions to the Rothian hero, for, like him, they crave nothing so much as the right to be taken seriously and resent nothing so much as the denial of their dignity). After he has been abducted by Mossad, and left alone in a classroom for three hours, "Roth" makes a series of appeals to Pipik (whom he mistakenly believes is responsible for his predicament) and then suddenly (as he


50 In Portnoy's Complaint, too, when the young Alex proclaims his atheism, his father berates him for betraying his ancestors: "And what about the Jewish people?" (Roth 1986: 60).
thinks) understands the reason for his abductor's silence. His fatal mistake has been "to deny this impostor the thing that any impostor covets and can least do without and that only I could meaningfully annoint him with" (Roth 1993: 320). Namely, his (assumed) name.

As Jean Rhys so eloquently illustrates in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, naming (and renaming) is an extraordinarily potent means of exerting power over the named (or renamed) subject. By imposing a joke name on Pipik, "Roth" robs him of his seriousness, and divests him of his chosen (albeit fraudulent) identity, just as Rochester's renaming of Antoinette strips her of the last vestiges of her origins, of her autonomy. The struggle over names in *Operation Shylock* is not the first such struggle in Roth. As Patrick O'Donnell notes in his Lacanian reading of *My Life as a Man*, naming plays an important role in that novel, but more significant in the context of Jewish identity is the change of name that Henry Zuckerman - Nathan's brother - undergoes in *The Counterlife*.

According to one of the conflicting narratives that compete with one another for ascendancy in this novel, Henry, having survived heart-bypass surgery, leaves his wife, his children, his lover and his thriving dental practice for a new life in Israel. Like Eli Peck in Roth's early story, "Eli, the Fanatic" (a story featuring an early version of the Jewish Other - the "greenie" with whom Peck exchanges clothes), Henry has a sort of Jewish epiphany. Whereas Eli symbolically sheds his old secular identity and adopts a new religious one, Henry formally Hebraizes his name (to Hanoch). Nor is this a

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51 O'Donnell has a very interesting discussion of the relationship between this novel (in which Nathan Zuckerman makes his first appearance, as the fictional surrogate of the writer Peter Tarnopol) and the later series of Zuckerman novels, which make no mention of Tarnopol. As he points out, the reader who returns to *My Life as a Man* having read the later novels "may experience confusion and literary vertigo in re-reading *My Life as a Man*, where a protagonist of Roth's uncreated canonical future 'reappears' as the uncanny double of an earlier protagonist ..." (O'Donnell 1988 in Milbauer & Watson 1988: 146).
purely cosmetic measure; he actually renounces his old self altogether - renounces the very concept of selfhood - in favour of a new role as an element of a larger entity: the Jewish people. When Nathan visits him in his new home on a kibbutz in Agor, Henry immediately becomes defensive about his new name.

"And no shit, please, about my name."
"Relax. Anybody can call you anything they want, as far as I'm concerned."
"You still don't get it. The hell with me, forget me. Me is somebody I have forgotten. Me no longer exists out here. There isn't time for me, there isn't need of me - here Judea counts, not me!"

(Roth 1987: 109)

The iterated italicisation here ironically undermines Henry/Hanoch's attitude of self-denial and tends to support Nathan's thesis that his brother's flight represents not an escape from self, but a bid to reassert his sense of self, after a lifetime of subjugation to duty - duty to his parents, to his wife, to his children, to his patients. In particular, Nathan surmises, his migration to Israel is a displaced fulfilment of an earlier, abortive plan to elope with an old lover to Switzerland.

What purpose is hidden in what he now calls "Jew" - or is "Jew" just something he now hides behind? He tells me that here he is essential, he belongs, he fits in - but isn't it more likely that what he has finally found is the unchallengeable means to escape his hedged-in life? Who hasn't been driven crazy by that temptation - yet how many pull it off like this? Not even Henry could, so long as he called his flight plan "Basel" - it's designating it "Judea" that's done the trick. If so, what inspirational nomenclature! Moses against the Egyptians, Judah Macabee against the Greeks, Bar Kochba against the Romans, and now, in our era, Hanoch of Judea against Henry of Jersey!

(Roth 1987: 123)
According to this interpretation, Hanoch represents a Jewish Other not just for Nathan, but for himself. The inspiration for this nomenclature derives from Hanoch's mentor, the militant Zionist settler, Mordecai Lippman, whose diatribes on the subject of The Jew hold a ghastly fascination for Nathan, as well as his brother. (The potency of Lippman's rhetoric may not be the only factor that sways the brothers, however: Nathan tells Henry that Lippman resembles their father - whose own lectures on Jewish history punctuate the earlier Zuckerman novels - so that if he is responsible for Henry's change of name, it becomes a symbol of rebirth not just in terms of Henry's new-found commitment to the cause, but in a more Freudian sense). Lippman, like Pipik, is a visionary and polemicist who believes that his vision of the Jewish future is the only viable one. Whereas Pipik foresees a second, Arab-sponsored Holocaust taking place if the Jews remain in Israel, Lippman predicts a second Holocaust in America, a "Great American Pogrom out of which American white purity will be restored" (Roth 1987: 128). Whereas for Pipik "authenticity as a Jew means living in the Diaspora"

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52 Roth in his later fiction seems to be elaborating on Sartre's suggestion that the dual identity of the Jew represents a "doubling of the fundamental relationship with the Other". Sartre, it seems, underestimates the extent of Jewish self-division, that quality "whose traces remained imprinted in just about every engaging Jew [Nathan] know[s]" (Roth 1987: 124). Smilesburger delivers a rhetorical tour de force on the subject in Operation Shylock.

Why must Jews be in conflict with one another? Why must they be in conflict with themselves? Because the divisiveness is not just between Jew and Jew - it is within the individual Jew. Is there a more manifold personality in all the world? I don't say divided. Divided is nothing. Even the goyim are divided. But inside every Jew there is a mob of Jews. The good Jew, the bad Jew. The new Jew, the old Jew. The lover of Jews, the hater of Jews. The friend of the goy, the enemy of the goy. The arrogant Jew, the wounded Jew. The pious Jew, the rascal Jew. The coarse Jew, the gentle Jew. The defiant Jew, the appeasing Jew. The Jewish Jew, the de-Jewed Jew. ... Is it any wonder that the Jew is always disputing? He is a dispute, incarnate!

(Roth 1993: 334)
(Roth 1993: 170), for Lippman the only authentic existence for the Jews is in "their biblical homeland" (Roth 1987: 120).

Lippman is not the only apocalyptic Jewish prophet in the novel, however. There is also the curious figure of Jimmy Ben-Joseph, who bears more than a passing resemblance both to Pipik and to Alvin Pepler. Jimmy accosts Nathan by the Wailing Wall, in words that echo Pepler's greeting in Zuckerman Unbound and anticipate Pipik's in Operation Shylock.

"It's really you! Here! Great! I've read all your books! You wrote about my family! The Lustigs of West Orange! In Higher Education! That's them! I'm your biggest admirer in the world!"

(Roth 1987: 95)

As with Pepler, it is a short step from expressing admiration for his hero's work to claiming comprehensive knowledge of his biography, to establishing his own literary claims: "I know everything about you. I write too. I wrote the Five Books of Jimmy!" (Roth 1987: 96). Jimmy informs Nathan that he is studying at the Diaspora Yeshiva, enthuses about baseball and then disappears - his is apparently just a walk-on part.

On Zuckerman's flight out of Israel, however, Jimmy unexpectedly reappears in an adjoining seat (dressed in the garb of an orthodox Jew, so that Nathan at first fails to recognise him), and calmly tells Nathan that he intends to hijack the plane and demand the closure of Yad Vashem - the Israeli museum dedicated to preserving the memory of the Holocaust. When Nathan tries to warn him of the consequences of such an attempt, Jimmy replies by emphasising that his own fate is unimportant, as he is merely the instrument of a larger destiny - none other than that of the Jewish people.
"What happens to me doesn’t matter, Nathan. How can I care about myself when I have penetrated to the core of the last Jewish problem? We are torturing ourselves with memories! With masochism! And torturing goyisch mankind! The key to Israel's survival is no more Yad Vashems! No more Remembrance Halls of the Holocaust! Now what we have to suffer is the loss of suffering! Otherwise, Nathan - and here is my prophecy as written in the Five Books of Jimmy - otherwise they will annihilate the State of Israel in order to annihilate its Jewish conscience! We have reminded them enough, we have reminded ourselves enough - we must forget!

(Roth 1987: 170)

Jimmy’s redemptive project is almost as bizarre as Pipik’s Diasporism and just as radical in its inversion of conventional Jewish thinking (through these two characters’ paranoid fantasies, Roth manages to rethink the entire course of recent Jewish history, and challenges the inviolability of its two central pillars - the Holocaust and Zionism). If his injunction to forget the Holocaust (and, by implication, the history of the Jews' suffering in general) is extreme, it does nonetheless raise an everyday dilemma for the modern-day Jew - one that is restated in less stark terms in some of Bellow’s work.

Saul Bellow and Jewish Memory: The Question of Assimilation

In Saul Bellow, the majority of protagonists are Jews, although the significance of their Jewishness (to themselves and in the scheme of the novels) varies considerably, yet he is unequivocal in his rejection of the label of "Jewish" writer:

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53 As Philip Roth points out, it is fairly incidental in the case of Augie March, but crucial in the cases of Leventhal, Herzog and Sammler (see Roth 1985b: 282-6).
I am often described as a Jewish writer; in much the same way as one might be called a Samoan astronomer or an Eskimo cellist or a Zulu Gainsborough expert. There is some oddity about it. I am a Jew, and I have written some books. I have tried to fit my soul into the Jewish-writer category, but it does not feel accommodated there. ... the contempt I feel [is great] for the opportunists, wise guys, and career types who impose such labels ...  

(Bellow 1974: 72)

Bellow's reductio ad absurdum is not convincing. First of all, it is at least arguable that a Zulu Gainsborough expert and an Eskimo cellist would share a consciousness of the strangeness of their choice of profession - of the fact that their interests are unusual in terms of their cultural backgrounds. This might in turn lead them to feel that they have something to prove to the more traditional and conventional authorities in their fields. They might have the same anxieties, in fact, with regard to their relationship to the art history and musical establishments as the young Bellow seems to have had with regard to the literary establishment. 

Moreover, even if we accept the essential terms of Bellow's argument, the fact remains

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54 Bellow is using the art of writing here in much the same way as Sartre uses mathematics in his explanation of one of the common strategies used by the Jew to dissociate himself from his Jewishness.

The best way to feel oneself no longer a Jew is to reason, for reasoning is valid for all and can be retraced by all. There is not a Jewish way of mathematics; the Jewish mathematician becomes a universal man when he reasons.

(Sartre 1948: 111-2)

55 Bellow admits, in an interview with Paris Review in 1966, that his early timidity as a writer was the result of feeling "the incredible effrontery of announcing myself to the world (in part I mean the WASP world) as a writer and an artist" and goes on, more explicitly, to claim that he "had good reason to fear that I would be put down as a foreigner, an interloper ..." (Bellow 1966b: 55-56). This fear of rejection by the WASP world is voiced by many of Bellow's Jewish protagonists. Herzog is disturbed because Ramona "did not recognise him as an American ... In the service his mates had also considered him a foreigner" (Bellow 1965a: 159). Citrine, in Humboldt's Gift, feels "mysteriously a misfit ... what ailed me was my unlikeness ... I was not wholly American" (Bellow 1975a: 215)
that a writer who thinks of himself as a Jew - as Bellow acknowledges here that he does - and whose work is full of Jewish characters, does not stand in the same relation to his Jewishness as these heuristic examples do to their heritage. There is, after all, no profession in which self-consciousness is so central and inescapable as that of writing. The astronomer does not create, he studies; he cannot fill the universe with Samoan galaxies in the way that a writer can people his universe with Samoans, or with Jews.\(^56\)

"I did not go the public library to read the Talmud but the novels and poems of Sherwood Anderson, Theodore Dreiser, Edgar Lee Masters, and Vachel Lindsay," Bellow points out, but this discounts extra-literary influences (Bellow 1974: 73). Sherwood Anderson and Theodore Dreiser might have admired, but certainly could not have written, *The Victim* or *Herzog*. Bellow is certainly not just a Jewish writer, but it seems foolish to deny that his Jewishness has played a significant part in shaping his writing.\(^57\)

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\(^56\) Although this, too, is perhaps debatable. A Foucauldian might view the evolution of cosmology precisely as a history of creation, of successive rewritings of Genesis. While modern instruments give us more (and different kinds) of information, how we understand and formulate that information may be a process as culturally-determined as is the writer's organisation of ideas about society or the inner universe - the self, or soul - in a novel or drama.

\(^57\) Critical opinion is deeply divided on the question of the importance of Bellow's Jewishness to his work, sometimes even within the writings of the same critic. L.H. Goldman, for example, complained in 1983 that the Bellow hero "has no interest in Jewish affairs, is not affiliated with a synagogue ... is not beset by problems that disturb most Jews" and that his Jewish protagonists "are stereotypic presentations similar to the presentation of the Jew by various Gentile writers of the early part of the century" (Goldman 1983 in Vinoda & Kumar 1983: 101, 100). Yet nine years later, in a reworking of the same article, she proclaimed approvingly that "The 'quality'of Bellow's Jewishness is incontrovertible. Saul Bellow's perspective is unmistakably Jewish" (Goldman 1992: 19). Other critical views range from the claim at one extreme that "The ultimate aspiration of Bellow's characters ... is the fantasy of Aliyah [that is, emigration to Israel] " (Goodman 1983 in Vinoda & Kumar 1983: 123) to, at the other end of the spectrum, the accusation that Bellow displays "insensitivity to the Jewish experience" (Louis Ehrenkrantz, quoted in Miller 1991: 250).
Bellow's first treatment of Jewishness as a theme is in his second novel, *The Victim*, which deals with the relationship between Asa Leventhal, a small-time Jewish journalist, and Kirby Allbee, a Gentile who blames him for the loss of his job and his subsequent decline into alcoholism and indigence. Brought up by his father, "a turbulent man, harsh and selfish toward his sons" (his mother "had died in an insane asylum when Leventhal was eight") Leventhal's childhood insecurity remains with him as an adult, and all happiness and prosperity seems precarious, provisional (Bellow 1948: 16).

He said occasionally to Mary, revealing his deepest feelings, "I was lucky. I got away with it." He meant that his bad start, his mistakes, the things that might have wrecked him, had somehow combined to establish him. He had almost fallen in with that part of humanity ... that did not get away with it - the lost, the outcast, the overcome, the effaced, the ruined. (Bellow 1948: 22)

Left alone by his wife (who is visiting her mother), Leventhal is suffering from the oppressive heat of a New York summer ("On some nights New York is as hot as Bangkok", runs the opening line of the novel), from hypochondria ("He was sure he was unwell") and from paranoia ("feeling ... that he was threatened by something while he slept"), as the novel begins (Bellow 1948: 7, 26). When Allbee - one of those who did not get away with it - appears, accusing him of responsibility for his plight, and reproaching him for enjoying those benefits (a job, a home, a wife) that he himself has lost, it is as though Leventhal has conjured up his own nemesis. Allbee first approaches Leventhal in the park, eventually persuading him to talk.

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58 Most of Bellow's male protagonists (Joseph, Tommy Wilhelm, Henderson, Herzog, Citrine, are estranged or divorced from their wives, and those who aren't - like Leventhal and Albert Corde - are forced, because of their wives' family commitments, to spend most of the novels alone).
Allbee grinned at him with an intimation of a shared secret that aroused and vexed Leventhal, and sickened him.
"Let's sit down," Allbee proposed.
"Damn him, he's got me, he's got hold of me," Leventhal thought.

(Bellow 1948: 30)

The possible allusion to Conrad's story "The Secret Sharer" and Leventhal's curious choice of words - "he's got hold of me" - hint at the extraordinary, almost hypnotic, influence that Allbee exerts over Leventhal. As Allbee proceeds with his recriminatory tale, Leventhal "suddenly felt that he had been singled out to be the object of some freakish, insane process" and, despite angrily denying Allbee's charges, Leventhal nevertheless continues to brood over their significance.

But then, as he dwelt on it, the whole affair began to lose much of its importance. It was, after all, something he could either take seriously or dismiss as an annoyance. It was up to him. He had only to insist that he wasn't responsible and it disappeared altogether. It was his conviction against an accusation nobody could expect him to take at face value.

(Bellow 1948: 87-8)

The psychic effort that Leventhal is expending on trying to convince himself that the affair needn't concern him is itself eloquent testimony to the anxiety it is causing him, and this internal tension is reinforced by the use of the word "conviction", which Leventhal intends to mean "belief", but which carries the legal connotation of "being found guilty". Later in the novel, Allbee arrives on his doorstep and pleads with him to be allowed in. Against his better judgment, Leventhal agrees, swayed by "a feeling of intimate nearness" and a "curious emotion of closeness" to his accuser, whose eyes, it seems to him, "duplicated the look in his own" (Bellow 1948: 141-2). Leventhal

59 This is perhaps an allusion to the German title of Kafka's *The Trial: Der Prozess*. In a sense, the significance of Allbee's accusations lie not in their truth or falsehood, but in the fact that they place Leventhal on trial, in the same existential sense as K. is in Kafka's novel.
allows him to stay the night and is visited, in a semi-conscious state by "a particularly vivid recollection of the explicit recognition in Allbee's eyes which he could not doubt was the double of something in his own" (Bellow 1948: 149). Allbee continues to stay in the flat and the relationship between the two men, although filled with mutual suspicion, nevertheless develops an intensity that has homoerotic undertones.

Eventually, however, Allbee tries to kill himself (and Leventhal, so Leventhal believes) and Leventhal throws him out. The novel ends with the two men encountering one another again some time later in the theatre. Allbee is now doing well in advertising and tells Leventhal that he has "made my peace with things as they are" (Bellow 1948: 256).

As it stands then, this is a Dostoyevskian parable about guilt, revenge, and redemption. However, there is also the complicating factor of racial tension to consider. That casual anti-Semitism exists in Leventhal's society is clear (at work he overhears his boss accusing him of taking "unfair advantage ... Like the rest of his brethren" and once at a cinema "A woman in the movies whom Mary had asked to remove her hat ... had turned around and muttered some insult about 'the gall of Jews' [Bellow 1948: 9, 132] ). However, it is equally clear that Leventhal is liable to imagine anti-Semitism where there is none. He does this for the first time when his nephew becomes ill and his brother's mother-in-law, who is Italian, behaves in a way that Leventhal interprets as hostile.

If anything happened to the boy she would consider it in the nature of a judgment on the marriage. The marriage was impure to her. Yes, he understood how she felt about it. A Jew, a man of wrong blood, of bad blood, had given her daughter two children, and that was why this was happening.

(Bellow 1948: 58)

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60 See particularly Bellow 1948: 195-6.
These suspicions turn out to be completely unfounded. Later in the novel, seeking an explanation for Allbee's persistent accusations, he appeals to a mutual friend, Stan Williston, who concedes that he feels there is something in what Allbee says. Leventhal immediately attributes Williston's judgment to latent anti-Semitism:

"You think that he burned me up and I wanted to get him in bad. Why? Because I'm a Jew; Jews are touchy, and if you hurt them they won't forgive you. That's the pound of flesh."

(Bellow 1948: 104)

Whereas Leventhal is filled with bitter resentment over what he perceives as Williston's latent anti-Semitism, he is curiously tolerant of Allbee's explicit prejudice. In a sense, indeed, he seems to find it comforting, in that it confirms his suspicions about all Gentiles. With someone like Williston, who affects an urbane rationality, Leventhal feels uneasy, awkwardly self-conscious, about his Jewishness. With Allbee, he knows where he stands and can express his own anger and prejudice freely. Although he repeatedly threatens Allbee with physical harm when the latter begins to hold forth about "you people" (as he does repeatedly), he never carries out these threats. Only once in the novel does Leventhal seem genuinely bewildered and saddened by Allbee's views:

"you people take care of yourselves before everything. You keep your spirit under lock and key ... Nothing ever tempts you to dissolve yourself ..."

"I don't see how you can talk that way. That's just talk. Millions of us have been killed. What about that?"

(Bellow 1948: 130-1)
This is the only mention (and even here it is oblique) of the Holocaust in the whole novel, and this is perhaps the most remarkable aspect of *The Victim*. Written immediately after the war, and published in 1947, Bellow deals with the phenomenon of anti-Semitism in the most local, the most microcosmic of contexts, with little sense of the global catastrophe that has just taken place in its name. It was not until many years later that Bellow confronted the impact of the Holocaust on the consciousness of American Jews.

Although the protagonist of *Mr. Sammler's Planet* is a Holocaust survivor, that novel is primarily concerned with the state of urban America. *The Bellarosa Connection*, however, centres around the struggle of another Holocaust survivor, Harry Fonstein, to wrest from his saviour, Billy Rose, an acknowledgment of his existence - and, by extension, of the legacy of the Holocaust. The story is narrated by an unnamed relative of Fonstein's (the step-son of one of Fonstein's aunts), the inventor of a unique system for improving recall and the founder of the Mnemosyne Institute, which is dedicated to its dissemination and which has made him a multi-millionaire. Now in retirement, he "would like to forget about remembering" (Bellow 1989b: 1-2), but realises that "if you have worked in memory, which is life itself, there is no retirement except in death" (Bellow 1989b: 2).

As a Jew, memory is not merely a sign of vitality, however; it carries with it a moral imperative, a burden of history that is shed only at the cost of personal integrity.

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61 Although Allbee's chosen method of suicide (he turns the gas on in Leventhal's flat, threatening his host's life as well as his own) may be intended to have allusive resonance.

62 In *Patrimony*, Philip Roth attributes the same philosophy to his father:

> You musn't forget anything - that's the inscription on his coat of arms. To be alive, to him, is to be made of memory - to him if a man's not made of memory, he's made of nothing.

(Roth 1991: 124)
Like David Levinsky, in Abraham Cahan's pre-war tale of the poor Jewish immigrant turned successful American millionaire (*The Rise of David Levinsky*), the narrator fights the temptation to erase his humble origins, to "trash his beginnings or distort his early history," and instead constantly reminds himself that he "was not born in a Philadelphia house with twenty-foot ceilings but began life as the child of Russian Jews from New Jersey" (Bellow 1989b: 2). His decision to tell the story of Harry Fonstein, his wife Sorella, and Billy Rose (a real-life Hollywood producer and impresario) is just such an act of remembrance - one conceived also as a personal atonement for having neglected to keep in touch with the Fonsteins (who, he is shocked to discover at the end of the narrative, have died in a car crash).

Fonstein has a flair for languages and is fluent in English soon after his arrival in New Jersey, but he still "spoke Yiddish now and then; it was the right language for his experiences" (Bellow 1989b: 7) and the narrator is fascinated by the story of how Billy Rose sponsored his (Fonstein's) escape from war-time Italy. Fonstein conjectures that the arrangements for his flight were perhaps the work of a committee - "the Bellarosa Society" (Bellow 1989b: 13) - but the narrator rejects this idea, perhaps because it emphasises the association between Billy - another self-made American millionaire - and himself (the founder of the Mnemosyne Institute and someone who, like Billy, is too involved with business to maintain his interest in the Fonsteins).

No, it was Billy acting alone on a spurt of feeling for his fellow Jews ... The God of his fathers still mattered. Billy was as spattered as a Jackson Pollock painting, and among the main trickles was his Jewishness ...

(Bellow 1989b: 13)

The curious invocation of Jackson Pollock (an icon of modern America) alongside Yahveh (a symbol of the Old World) illustrates the cultural schizophrenia of the American Jew. The truth of Billy's motivation remains obscure, but the narrator constructs him as the archetypal American Jew whose ambivalence towards his
ethnicity - residually aware of, and even privately sentimental about his Jewishness, but, in his determination to authenticate his American credentials, liable to resist any public affiliation with it - is paradoxically one of the strongest proofs of that ethnicity. To put it another way, Rose is the type of the Jewish-American whose hyphenated identity signifies a pyschomachia between Old World and New World sensibilities and values.

At the end of his narration, the narrator finally, reluctantly, admits to being "a Jew of an entirely different breed [to Fonstein] ... closer to Billy Rose," a hybrid - "half Jewish, half Wasp" - who must "pay a price for being a child of the New World" and the novella is really an extended meditation on the meaning of Jewishness to a Jew living in secular America - "a diaspora within a diaspora" (Bellow 1989b: 88, 89, 37).

When Harry's wife, Sorella, explains that Billy Rose refuses to meet her husband, the narrator conjectures that perhaps such a meeting would prove to be "Too Jewish a moment for him? Drags him down from his standing as a full-fledged American?", and Sorella admits that Harry attributes Billy's attitude to "some kind of change in the descendants of immigrants in this country" (Bellow 1989b: 23). This allegation strikes a chord with the narrator, who "had often wondered uncomfortably about the Americanisation of the Jews", which seems to entail physical growth ("My father's height was five feet six inches, mine was six feet two inches") and a corresponding spiritual diminution, illustrated not only by the self-confessed weaknesses of the narrator but, more pointedly, by the story of Gilbert Fonstein (Bellow 1989b: 23).

Harry and Sorella's son is a mathematical prodigy, who dissipates his talents and becomes an inveterate gambler. The narrator learns of his fate from a college friend of Gilbert's, who describes himself as a "house-sitter" and who engages him in a protracted conversation before revealing how the Fonsteins died (in a car crash, while on their way to Atlantic City, to bail Gilbert out of trouble). As with Billy Rose, the narrator clearly identifies himself in some way with young Fonstein, an identification
strengthened by the revelation that Gilbert's enthusiasm for gambling began when he devised a scheme for winning at Blackjack, a scheme which "involves memorizing the deck in every deal" (Bellow 1989b: 99). Instinctively, he postulates a link between Gilbert's moral fragility and a possible adulteration of his Jewish identity and he asks his friend whether Gilbert "take[s] any interest in his Jewish background" (Bellow 1989b: 99). Before relating the young man's reply, the narrator again conjectures that "The only life he cared to lead was that of an American" (Bellow 1989b: 99). Nor is this the only suggestion that the effort to be American involves at best a dilution, at worst a betrayal, of Jewishness. In his efforts to trace the Fonsteins after thirty years of silence, he contacts Hyman Swerdlow, an old mutual acquaintance, and recalls Hyman's father, from whom young Swerdlow had "inherited an ancient Jewish face ... Hyman had discovered a way to drain the Jewish charge from it" (Bellow 1989b: 67, 81).

In Herzog, too, the willingness to remember - and remain faithful to - one's immigrant origins is a mark of integrity. For Herzog, his heritage acts as his conscience - a reflex of consciousness inspired by any tendency to hubris. For example, when he goes shopping for some summer clothes and buys an ostentatious "coat of crimson and white stripes," he turns to the salesman to observe that "in the old country his family had worn black gabardines down to the ground" (Bellow 1965a: 20). On returning home, Herzog tries on his various purchases and returns to this theme of old-world asceticism versus new-world aestheticism. He recalls that his mother "wanted Moses to become a rabbi and he seemed to himself gruesomely unlike a rabbi now in the trunks and straw hat, his face charged with heavy sadness, foolish utter longing of which a religious life might have purged him" (Bellow 1965a: 22). Here it becomes clear that the new clothes are significant not just because of their contrast to the austere garments of Herzog's forefathers, but also because they are a symbol of Herzog's choice of a life of American decadence (as he sees it) over the life of spiritual
devotion. Noting his own mournful expression in the mirror, Herzog seems to perceive his recent misfortunes (in particular, his second wife leaving him for his best friend) in the light of a judgment on the frivolity and narcissism of his life.

He is equally rigorous in his judgments of his Jewish acquaintances' attitudes to their Jewishness. He finds Valentine Gersbach's garbled Yiddish offensive - a corrupt distortion of the desire to honour one's past. He is contemptuous of his old contemporary Shapiro's affectations of refinement, seeing in them the same betrayal of his father's old-world dignity as the narrator in The Bellarosa Connection sees in the behaviour of Gilbert Fonstein and Hyman Swerdlow.

When he found that Madeleine was not only a beauty but was preparing for her doctoral examination in Slavonic languages, he said, "How delightful!" And it was he himself who knew, betraying the knowledge by affectation, that for a Russian Jew from Chicago's West Side that "How delightful!" was inappropriate ... Shapiro's father had had no money and peddled rotten apples from South Water Street in a wagon. There was more of the truth of life in those spotted, spoiled apples, and in old Shapiro, who smelled of the horse and of produce, than in all of these learned references.63

(Bellow 1965a: 70)

Just as the narrator's guilt for his own betrayal of his father's legacy is discernible in his indictment of Gilbert Fonstein and Hyman Swerdlow, so here Herzog's censorious, derisive tone is the result of his guilty recognition of himself in Shapiro, a recognition that he projects onto Shapiro himself. Herzog's idealisation of Shapiro's apple-peddling father (reminiscent of Tolstoy's idealisation of the peasant Platon Smilesburger in Operation Shylock identifies the difficulty of finding a natural register for his verbal discourse as a perennial problem for the Jew.

63 Part of the Jewish problem is that they never know what voice to speak in. Refined? Rabbinical? Hysterical? Ironical? ... No matter what he says or how he says it, it's inappropriate. Inappropriateness is the Jewish style.

(Roth 1993: 332)
Karataev in *War And Peace*, whose instinctual, anti-intellectual understanding is seen to contain a truth profounder than Pierre Bezukhov's educated intelligence) is clearly related to his nostalgic affection for his own father's pitiful attempts to scrape a living (including a disastrous venture into bootlegging that echoes the experience of Bellow's own father), which now seem to him to contain more of "the truth of life" than his own academic pursuits. His old friend and lawyer, Sandor Himmelstein, exploits this penitential sentimentalism for his own ends, continually rebuking Herzog for his intellectual pretensions ("'Don't give me that hoity-toity. I'm a kike myself...'") and blackmailing him with displays of Jewish "potato love" ("'We'll find an orthodox shul... You and me, a pair of old-time Jews'" [Bellow 1965a: 86, 91]).

Paradoxically, Shapiro is never more characteristically Jewish, Herzog feels, than when he is self-consciously trying to appear not to be, while Himmelstein is never less so than when he tries to be. Sartre, too, observed this paradox, claiming that self-consciousness is a peculiarly Jewish trait, but that it represents an attempt to escape from the imprisoning definition of Jewishness:

> the Jew is not content to act or think; he sees himself act, he sees himself think ... It is not the man but the Jew whom the Jews seek to know in themselves through introspection; and they wish to know him in order to deny him ... Thus we may explain that particular quality of Jewish irony which exercises itself most often at

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64 If Himmelstein is guilty of sentimentalising Jewishness, Herzog's other Jewish lawyer, Simkin, conversely, acquiesces in the popular demonising of Jews. When Herzog is contemplating fighting for custody of his daughter, he advises him to engage "a clean-cut gentile lawyer... Don't have a lot of Jews yelling in court" (Bellow 1965a: 213). This attitude is echoed (and satirised) by Zuckerman in his guise as Milton Appel in *The Anatomy Lesson*, who tells his chauffeur Ricky that

> I see all those distinguished Wasps with the beautiful grey hair and the pin-stripe suits who don't have pimples on their ass. They're my lawyers. That's who I send into court for me. I don't send in Jews. Jews are too crazy... Jews sweat. These guys are in control... These guys are quiet.

(Roth 1984: 219-20)
the expense of the Jew himself, and which is a perpetual attempt to see himself from the outside. The Jew, because he knows he is under observation, takes the initiative and attempts to look at himself through the eyes of others ... while he contemplates himself with the "detachment" of another, he feels himself in effect detached from himself; he becomes another person, a pure witness.

(Sartre 1948: 96-7)

This is an uncannily accurate description of the process of self-detachment that Herzog, who describes himself as "a prisoner of perception, a compulsory witness," undergoes (Bellow 1965a: 72).

In his posture of collapse on the sofa ... his eyes with greater than normal radiance watched his own work in the garden with detachment, as though he were looking through the front end of a telescope at a tiny clear image.

That suffering joker.

(Bellow 1965a: 10-11)

The italicised, self-satirical comment seems to confirm Sartre's equation of self-alienation with self-contempt ("suffering" having the quality of a profane epithet like "bleeding") and indeed Herzog does suffer from the exacerbated self-consciousness - what Sartre calls "overdetermination" - that Sartre sees as essentially Jewish. Yet this passage is one of self-regard in the figurative as well as the literal sense (Herzog is a joker, but a suffering - in the non-profane, as well as profane sense of the word - joker - that is to say, his clowning has its basis in something serious, something that writers ever since Aeschylus have regarded as ennobling). Herzog's "detachment" leads not to objectivity but to a heightened subjectivity, a solipsistic state in which the boundaries between the self and the world are blurred, a blurring reflected formally by the blurring of the first and third-person voices in the novel.

This blurring occurs in the opening sentence of the novel ("If I am out of my mind, it's all right with me, thought Moses Herzog") and continues throughout, so that we are never entirely sure whether Herzog is the narrator (sometimes choosing to speak of himself in the third person, as Mosby does in "Mosby's Memoirs") or not.
When Herzog satirises his own guilty impulse to identify himself as The Jew - to be authentically Jewish in the Sartrean sense - then, it is not clear whether there is a further level of satirical detachment (between the narrator and Herzog) or not:

Someone came in the night and left a used sanitary napkin in a covered dish on his desk, where he kept bundles of notes for his Romantic studies. That was his reception by the natives. A momentary light of self-humor passed over his face ... Suppose I accepted the challenge. I could be Moses, the old Jew-man of Ludeyville, with a white beard, cutting the grass under the washline with my antique reel-mower. Eating woodchucks.

(Bellow 1965a: 48-9)

Does Herzog's fantasy of defying the odds (and the hostility of neighbours) by making a go of it in his dilapidated rural home in Ludeyville represent the enlightened recognition of his own absurdity, or is his "self-humor" itself absurd? Such ambiguities undermine Harold Fisch's belief that "It is simply taken for granted that only if Herzog faces up to his Jewish identity ... can he honestly grapple with his problems" (Fisch 1968 in Vinoda & Kumar 1983: 22). Later in the novel, we are told that the Ludeyville house is a "symbol of his Jewish struggle for a solid footing in White Anglo-Saxon Protestant America" and indeed Herzog is still engaged in this struggle at the end of the novel, still striving to render it habitable (Bellow 1965a: 309). Like the Philadelphia mansion with its twenty-foot ceilings and ornate decorations - home of the narrator in The Bellarosa Connection - the value of Ludeyville to Herzog is that it is an "American" home, in the sense that is not a "Jewish" one. However, these terms beg some important semantic questions.

Throughout The Bellarosa Connection and Herzog, the epithets "Jewish" and "American" are used ubiquitously, not simply to denote race, religion or nationality, but to connote a bewildering range of qualities, so that they become repositories of conflicting experiences, sensibilities, philosophies - protean in their multivalency and yet imbued with a cumulative resonance that prevents them from becoming amorphous.
At times, there seems to be a simple antithetical relationship between the terms. When he weeps at his father's funeral, Herzog's brother, Shura (who resembles Augie's elder brother Simon in his hard-nosed business acumen) snaps at him:

"Don't carry on like a goddamn immigrant". I embarrassed him in front of his golfing friends, the corporation presidents ... Here he was the good American. I still carry European pollution, am infected by the Old World with feelings like Love - Filial Emotion. Old stuporous dreams.65

(Bellow 1965a: 280-1)

Elsewhere in Herzog, there are references to Herzog's "Jewish family feelings", which make the prospect of his children growing up without him peculiarly painful, and to the "Jewish art of tears" (Bellow 1965a: 23, 276). Similarly, in The Bellarosa Connection, there are times when Jewishness seems to be equated with a susceptibility to sentiment, a tendency to become over-emotional. Describing Billy's appearance, the narrator notes that "One eye was set a little closer to the nose than the other, giving a touch of Jewish pathos to his look" and when the young man who answers the phone at the Fonstein address toys with him before revealing the truth, he comments bitterly that "He was taunting me - for my Jewish sentiments" (Bellow 1989b: 51, 101).

This binary opposition between American pragmatism and Jewish emotional indulgence does not always obtain, however. When the novella's narrator questions Harry about his romance with Sorella, Fonstein gives him "a hard-edged Jewish look" and when a clerk at the King David Hotel (at which the Fonsteins, Billy Rose and the narrator are all guests) rebukes Billy Rose for his miserliness, Fonstein observes: "Jewish assumptions ... Not clerks and guests, but one Jew letting another Jew have it - plain talk" (Bellow 1989b: 20, 46). Jewishness in these instances seems to be

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65 Here, as elsewhere in the novel, "European" and "Old World" are disguised terms - virtual synonyms - for "Jewish".
associated with hard-nosed realism, or even cynicism - a refusal to observe social niceties, to indulge the excesses of others.

When a Rabbi from Jerusalem rings him, trying to trace the Fonsteins on behalf of someone claiming to be Harry's uncle, the narrator describes the ensuing exchange as a "Jewish conversation" (apparently referring to its functional nature), but when he analyses Billy Rose's motive for coming to Israel, he suggests that he wants "to put a top dressing of Jewish grandeur on his chicken-scratch career," where "Jewish" seems to suggest an affinity with Billy's show-business instincts (Bellow 1989b: 67, 57).

Indeed, show-business is a phenomenon that seems to combine American and Jewish instincts, as Sorella wryly observes.

"When American Jews decided to make a statement about the War Against the Jews, they had to fill Madison Square Garden with big-name celebs singing Hebrew and 'America the Beautiful.' "

(Bellow 1989b: 59)

Elsewhere, "American" displays a semantic dissonance similar to "Jewish". On the one hand, it seems to connote a spiritual vacuity, so that when his father introduces him to Fonstein as a salutary reminder of the experience of European Jewry, the narrator feels that he is being "charged with American puerility," where "American" seems to be an amplification of "puerility" (Bellow 1989b: 5). On the other hand, it can signify an intellectual curiosity - a sociological interest in the drama of human conflict - as when, anticipating the confrontation between Sorella and Billy, the narrator delivers this aside: "Most interesting - at least to an American mind" (Bellow 1989b: 50).

Having listened to Sorella's account of the meeting, which ends with her throwing a file (containing compromising information about Rose with which she had intended to blackmail him into meeting her husband) at him and "making the Italian gesture people used to make in a street fight", he comments "A very American conclusion" and Sorella agrees that "it was from start to finish a one-hundred-percent American event"
Recalling the event later on, he reiterates "Her interview with Billy Rose had ... been such an American thing" (Bellow 1989b: 75). What is so "American" about this clash of titans (Sorella is physically huge, Billy possesses magnitude of character) is its melodramatic dimension, the spectacularly demonstrative display of emotion. Yet to be "American" can also mean to be undemonstrative, taciturn, insular. When the narrator explains to the young man at the Fonstein residence that, throughout the long interim during which he hadn't contacted his old friends, he had always felt an emotional proximity to them, he concurs. "People withdraw into themselves, and then they work up imaginary affections. It's a common American condition" (Bellow 1989b: 94).

The "American condition", no less than the Jewish one, is a major preoccupation in the work of Bellow, Roth and Heller, and in the following chapter I shall look at some of their attempts to explore and explain it.
EXPLAINING AMERICANS: MYTH, HISTORY, CONFORMITY

one of the principal functions of literature in America has been to serve as a

guidebook or manual of Americanness ...

(Rahv 1969: 258)

The Jewish writer in America feels imposed on him the role of being The

American, of registering his experience for his compatriots and for the world as

The American Experience.

(Fiedler 1957 in Malin 1969: 3)

Clyde Griffiths and Jay Gatsby perish because they are Americans, Agamemnon

and Macbeth because they are human beings.

(Schwartz 1954 in Trachtenberg 1979: 8)

The American Writer and the American Novel: The Search For Identity

The history of the American novel, like the history of America and the history of

the novel, has been one of rapid ascendancy to pre-eminence from unpromising

beginnings.

Writing of the novel in 1750, Dr. Johnson indicated its subordinate place in the

hierarchy of literary forms:

These books are written chiefly to the young, the ignorant, and the idle, to whom

they serve as lectures of conduct, and introductions to life. They are the

entertainments of minds unfurnished with ideas, and therefore easily susceptible of

impressions; not fixed by principles, and therefore easily following the current of

fancy; not informed by experience, and consequently open to every false

suggestion and partial account.

(Johnson 1986: 176)
Johnson characterises novel-readers in terms of what they lack - ideas, principles, experience - and sees the role of the novel as admonitory and didactic: a sort of moral handbook. The novelist should not aspire to the heights of great art, rather, it is his duty to ensure "that the highest degree of reverence ... be paid to youth, and that nothing indecent ... be suffered to approach their eyes" (Johnson 1986: 176).

Many of the first visitors to America some hundred years ever were no more sanguine about its prospects. William Bradford, writing of the reception of his Puritan brethren in the New World, laments that

they had no friends to welcome them, nor inns to entertain or refresh their weatherbeaten bodys, no houses or much less towns to repair to ... [all was] a hideous & desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men ...

(Bradford 1899: 94-5)

This is the first in a long line of negative catalogues composed by American writers to emphasise the dearth of culture in America. Like Johnson's construction of novel-readers, Bradford's America is distinguished by its deficiencies - by what it has not, rather than by what it has. The implied relationship between Bradford's community and the native Americans is not unlike that between Johnson's novelist and his readers. Where the novelist educates his "ignorant" readers, inculcates in the "idle" a sense of duty and responsibility, Bradford and his followers, working with even more intractable materials, must cultivate the "desolate wilderness" of America and civilise its "wild men" (an imperative that is parodied in Aunt Sally's struggle to "sivilise" Huck in *Huckleberry Finn*).

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1 There is of course one form of abundance here - of "the wild" - which itself becomes a powerful American trope.
By 1885, however, when Twain's novel appears, the novel had developed in ways that Johnson could never have foreseen. The previous year had seen Henry James proclaim the novel "the most magnificent form of art" (James 1986a: 179) and his friend and fellow novelist William Dean Howells, writing at the end of the century, went even further, eulogising the novel as "this unrivalled, this irreproachable form, beside which epic and drama dwindle to puny dwarfishness" (Howells 1993: 222). For James no less than for Johnson, the novelist has a grave moral responsibility (indeed for James the novelist's mantle is that of a "sacred office"), but whereas for Johnson that responsibility is didactic, for James it is aesthetic (James 1986a: 167). Indeed it is precisely those attributes of the novel that Johnson commends - its moral purpose, its propriety, and the preponderance of the young among its readers - that James decries.

To what degree a purpose in a work of art is a source of corruption I shall not attempt to inquire; the one that seems to me least dangerous is the purpose of making a perfect work. As for our novel ... it strikes me as addressed in a large degree to "young people," and that this in itself constitutes a presumption that it will be rather shy. There are certain things which it is generally agreed not to discuss, not even to mention, before young people. That is very well, but the absence of discussion is not a symptom of the moral passion.

(James 1986a: 181)

For James "moral passion" involves, indeed is synonymous with, critical intelligence and aesthetic sophistication: an immoral book is coarse, superficial and simplistic; a moral book is refined, profound and complex. In other words, it is not the subject matter that determines the moral status of a novel, but the execution; a good novel is informed by a moral sensibility, not shaped by a moral purpose.

At the end of the century, James further refines his poetics of the novel in an article entitled "The Future of the Novel". Here he observes that the novel had initially struggled to achieve respectability, to emerge from the shadow of more venerable and venerated rivals, arriving "late at self-consciousness; but it has done its utmost ever
since to make up for lost opportunities” (James 1986a: 242). This observation might easily be applied to America itself.

It is not just American novelists who feel this urge to grapple with the meaning of America. James Oliver Robertson points out that

Americans' sense that they are unique in the world, vested with characteristics so peculiarly their own that they cannot be understood without explanation, leads to frequent self-examination.

(Robertson 1980: 5)

Some, like Sacvan Bercovitch, see the roots of this self-examination in the Puritan tradition of self-revelation through the reading of scripture.

America was a venture in exegesis. You were supposed to discover it as a believer unveils scripture. America's meaning was implicit in its destiny, and its destiny was manifest to all who had the grace to discover its meaning.

(Bercovitch 1981 in Grgus 1981: 6)

Others argue that, as Rupert Wilkinson puts it (paraphrasing David Potter),

Americans went in search of their national character because of their immigrant backgrounds; they felt themselves to be a society of newcomers, unbounded by a common ethnic heritage.

(Wilkinson 1988: 11)

Whatever the explanation, that Americans have always striven to explain themselves - to construct an American self - seems indisputable.

From the outset, two competing and contradictory myths of the New World have co-existed. According to one view (initially held by some of the early Puritans and other religious dissidents who took refuge there)² America was a second Eden, an

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² It would of course be misleading to suggest that all the early settlers fell into one of two camps - adhering either to the view of America as a savage wilderness, or to the
unspoilt land offering the chance to wipe out the legacy of Old World venality and start again, renewing Adam's original covenant with God. According to the other view (propogated initially by those in the Old World and also by disillusioned settlers), America was a savage wilderness likely to brutalise and corrupt those who sought refuge there - those refugees, that is, who were not already utterly depraved (as many Europeans believed them to be).

The Utopian spirit is evident at times in the writings of Benjamin Franklin, whose *Information to Those Who Would Remove to America* of 1784 invokes the "salubrity of the air, the healthiness of the climate, the plenty of good provisions ... " as proof that "the increase of inhabitants by natural generation is very rapid in America" (Franklin 1784: 13). Franklin's key text here is clearly the Bible's injunction to "go forth and multiply": by emphasising the fecundity of the American climate and the fertility of the American people, Franklin is making an implicit claim for America as God's country. Indeed, although Franklin begins his tract pragmatically, warning prospective immigrants that they "must work and be industrious to live" and conceding that "there are ... very few [Americans] that in England would be called rich: It is rather a general happy mediocrity that prevails" (Franklin 1784: 11, 5), he finishes with a conventionally pious flourish:

> the Divine Being seems to have manifested his approbation of the mutual forbearance and kindness with which the different sects treat each other, by the remarkable prosperity with which he has been pleased to favour the whole country.

(Franklin 1784: 24)

view of America as an idyllic prelapsarian world. In fact, they were quite capable of entertaining both views simultaneously, a sort of double vision that Dickens satirises in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, in which the dismal swamp development where young Martin sojourns is named Eden.
Crèvecoeur's enthusiastic championing of America (which sits somewhat oddly with an apparent personal reluctance to spend much time there), in *Letters from an American Farmer*, is similarly imbued with religious zeal. He insists that the quintessence of American man is his newness and that this newness represents a symbolic rebirth of mankind. 

*He* is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds ... Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world. Americans are the western pilgrims ... 

(Crèvecoeur 1945: 43)

In Crévecoeur's eyes, America is marked out to perform a redemptive role in the history of the mankind - not so much a New Eden as a New Jerusalem. His image of disparate individuals melting into a new (the word that resounds throughout the passage) race is an early expression of that most potent of American myths - America as the great melting pot. This messianic note was taken up by Emerson, Thoreau and especially by Whitman, who, in his Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, prophesies the advent of a new democratic religion which will "arise in America and be responded to from the remainder of the earth" (Whitman 1960: 22).³

³ The potency of Whitman's vision - and the importance of his own place in it - is aptly illustrated by Waldo Frank's remark that "He [Whitman] talked with God, standing upon America as Moses upon Sinai" (Frank 1972: 204). Whitman's mystical religion was not the only one to make this kind of claim. Many Christian sects, notably the Mormons, took the early Purtians' rhetoric a stage further and effectively rewrote the Bible so that America became the destined site of Christ's revelation.
Where Bradford had seen only waste and terror, Whitman and Thoreau saw in the vastness of America an unsurpassable grandeur and splendour; the promise that its inhabitants would exceed the people of all other nations in their character and culture:

The largeness of the nation were monstrous without a corresponding largeness and generosity of the spirit of the citizen.

(Whitman 1960: 6)

If the heavens of America appear infinitely higher, and the stars brighter, I trust that these facts are symbolical of the height to which the philosophy and poetry and religion of her inhabitants may one day soar.

(Thoreau 1957: 607-8)

Whitman's tribute is equivocal (phrased in the subjunctive, it is not clear whether the "corresponding largeness and generosity of the spirit" does actually exist) and Thoreau's prophecy tentative (here the conditional tense imparts a provisionality to the optimism), but the divergence between their interpretations of the American landscape and Bradford's is clear enough.

Moreover, the Preface to *Leaves of Grass* also contains a powerful subversion of the topos of the negative catalogue:

No great literature nor any like style of behaviour or oratory or social intercourse or household arrangements or public institutions or the treatment by bosses of employed people, nor executive detail or the detail of the army or navy, nor spirit of legislation or courts or police or tuition or architecture or songs or amusements or the costumes of young men, can long elude the jealous and passionate instinct of American standards.

(Whitman 1960: 23)

As with the typical negative catalogue, Whitman begins with a long list of institutions and areas of cultural endeavour prefaced by negative forms ("No ... nor"), but he turns the meaning of the sentence on its head through the unexpected locution that succeeds this list ("can long elude ... ").
While men like Franklin, Crèvecoeur, Thoreau, Emerson and Whitman proselytised for America, promoting the New World as a place of rehabilitation and regeneration, others yearned for the cultural legacy and historical tradition of the Old World. Washington Irving - the first professional writer to gain wide-spread recognition in America - expresses this nostalgic desire in The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon.

My native country was full of youthful promise; Europe was rich in the accumulated treasures of age. I longed ... to escape ... from the commonplace realities of the present, and lose myself among the shadowy grandeurs of the past. (Irving 1978: 9)

Irving makes explicit here the comparison that all judgments of America implicitly invoke: the comparison with Europe. Of course, this cultural contest is an unequal one, because the extant will always win out over the prospective. Irving sees Europe as the repository of history, replete with rich, arcane but also archaic tradition, and America as a tabula rasa, devoid of distinction but with a future of exciting possibilities. America lacks a cultural tradition (the "treasures of age"), and all the history (or "antiquity") in which Europe abounds. At the same time, it has the potential to outstrip Europe. Irving's preference for "the shadowy grandeurs of the past" over "the commonplace realities of the present" suggests that Europe is culturally superior, but also that it has reached its zenith and is already in a sense being superseded - that its time is past, and that America's time is at hand. The newness of America for him signifies not only lack, but promise, not only the absence of culture, but the sloughing off of corrupt and stale custom. Irving makes clear, however, that Americans continued to feel in the shadows of their European cousins, literally as well as figuratively.
I had read in the works of various philosophers, that all animals degenerated in America, and man among the number. A great man of Europe, thought I, must therefore be as superior to a great man of America, as a peak of the Alps to a highland of the Hudson; and in this idea I was confirmed by observing the comparative importance and swelling magnitude of many English travellers among us; who, I was assured, were very little people in their own country. I will visit this land of wonders, thought I, and see the gigantic race from which I am degenerated.

(Irving 1978: 9)

Despite the playful tone, Irving's assimilation of the myth of European superiority was real enough and shared by many of his successors. Emerson, too, despite his patriotism and insistence that America should break free of European influence ("We have listened too long to the courtly masses of Europe" [Emerson 1977: 45]) nevertheless upholds this idea of European physical superiority in his *English Traits*.

They [Englishmen] are bigger men than the Americans. I suppose a hundred English taken at random out of the street would weigh a fourth more than so many Americans.

(Emerson 1977: 373)

Even Thoreau, often more strident in his anti-Europeanism and philo-Americanism than Emerson, seems torn between denouncing those who "are dinning in our ears that we Americans ... are intellectual dwarfs compared with the ancients" and echoing their sentiments (elsewhere in *Walden* he describes Americans as "a race of tit-men" whose "reading .... conversation and thinking, are all on a very low level, worthy only of pygmies and manikins" [Thoreau 1957: 565, 360, 359]).

For many writers - particularly novelists - this supposed physical and intellectual inferiority of the American corresponds with, indeed results in, a culture of mediocrity. Where poets like Thoreau and Whitman connect the land itself - its topography and geography - with the artistic achievement of its people, novelists like James see the
artist as a product and chronicler of society. For James culture and society existed in a symbiotic relationship - "the future of fiction is intimately bound up with the future of the society that produces and consumes it" (James 1986a: 247) - and his decision (and that of so many of his successors in the twenties and thirties) to live in Europe stemmed from the conviction that American society could not sustain their fiction (paradoxically, their consciousness of their Americanness was heightened by their state of exile). 4 Those who stayed complained loudly and frequently of the hardships they faced as American artists.

James Fenimore Cooper, in his Notions of the Americans (ostensibly "a defense of the United States against the attacks of European travelers"), bemoans "the poverty of materials" at the disposal of the American author:

There is scarcely an ore which contributes to the wealth of the author that is found here in veins as rich as in Europe. There are no annals for the Historian, no follies (beyond the most vulgar and common place) for the satirist; no manners, for the dramatist; no obscure fictions for the writer of romance; no gross and hardy offences against decorum for the moralist; nor any of the rich artificial auxiliaries of Poetry.

(Cooper 1991: 348)

Two centuries after Bradford's gloomy observations on the state of the New World the negative catalogue seems entrenched as a perennial feature of American discourse on America. Cooper's sentiments are echoed by Nathaniel Hawthorne in the Preface to The Marble Faun, where he speaks of "the difficulty of writing a Romance about a country where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque

4 As Bellow puts it:

True writers ... had gone to Europe to write their American books ... Corporate, industrial America could not give them what they needed. In Paris they were free to be fully American.

(Bellow 1994: 235).
and gloomy wrong, nor anything but a commonplace prosperity, as is happily the case with my dear native land" (Hawthorne 1990: 3).

These negative catalogues are markedly different in tone from Bradford's, however. The peculiarly striking aspect of Cooper's and Hawthorne's complaints is that we are not sure whether they are really complaints at all. Cooper laments the lack of follies other than commonplace ones, the absence of "gross ... offences against decorum" - a situation that would seem more desirable than regrettable; Hawthorne bemoans the fact that no "gloomy wrong" darkens American skies, that prosperity is commonplace, but acknowledges at the same time that this contributes to the affection in which he holds his "dear native land". In fact Cooper's and Hawthorne's negative catalogues seem to teeter on the edge of irony, to flirt with parody. This is not to suggest that their arguments that, as American novelists, they are inherently disadvantaged are insincere - only that their feelings about their own nation and their place as artists within that nation are as complex and ambiguous as those of Emerson and Thoreau.

Perhaps the most telling criticism that Cooper and Hawthorne (echoing Franklin and Irving before them) make about America, is that it is a land of the quotidian, the unexceptional, the "commonplace". In America, they seem to be saying, there is nothing hidden, no inner life, no artifice - and where there is no artifice, there can be no art. This idea - that the mediocrity of American culture is a consequence of the conventional conformity of Americans (or vice versa, it is a chicken-and-egg

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5 As early as 1782, in fact, we have an example of a parody of a negative catalogue (that is to say a negative catalogue that emphasises the benefits of lacking the items it lists) in Crèvecoeur's Letters from an American Farmer.

Here are no aristocratical families, no courts, no kings, no bishops, no ecclesiastical dominion, no invisible power giving to a few a very visible one, no great manufacturers employing thousands, no great refinements of luxury.

(Crèvecoeur 1945: 40)
argument) resurfaces repeatedly in the work of later American writers. In 1919 Waldo Frank noted "the uniformity of the American type" and claimed that "the American people [are] among the least articulate and the least artistic" (Frank 1972: 17, 180) and three years later H.L. Mencken claimed that "the American people ... constitute the most timorous, sniveling, poltroonish, ignominious mob of serfs and goose-steppers ever gathered under one flag" (Mencken 1965: 7).

Here in the U.S., we have no jobs for grand dukes, and none for Wirkliche Geheimräte, and none for palace eunuchs, and none for masters of the buck-hounds, and none (any more) for Tod säufer - and a very few for oboe-players, metaphysicians, astrophysicists, assyriologists, watercolorists, stylites, and epic poets.

(Mencken 1965: 10)

Mencken's chronicle of woe, like those of Irving, Cooper and Hawthorne, is ambiguous. He seems both to regret America's lack of genuine cultural distinction and to celebrate its democratic spirit (it would seem a genuine matter for regret that America offers few opportunities for water-colorists and oboe-players; rather less so that it excludes would-be Tod säufer). The references to palace eunuchs and to masters of the buck-hounds may allude ironically to Henry James's negative catalogue in his book on Hawthorne, perhaps the most notorious of all American negative catalogues. Yet this too, as we might expect from James, is far from straight-forward.

No State ... No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentlemen, no palaces, no castles, nor manors, nor old country-houses, no parsonages, nor thatched cottages nor ivied ruins; no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches; no great universities nor public schools - no Oxford, nor Eton, nor Harrow; no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures, no political society, no sporting class - no Epsom nor Ascot!

(James 1986a: 109)
How seriously are we to take this much-quoted \textit{tour de force} of denigration?

We know from James's self-imposed exile that he believed in the superiority of European culture; we know from the novels that he also believed in the virtues of American idealism and sincerity. The exclamation mark at the end of the list is the first, but not the only hint, that James might have his tongue in his cheek. The passage that follows - one that is very rarely examined - muddies the waters further.

Some such list as that might be drawn up of the absent things in American life - especially in the American life of forty years ago, the effect of which, upon an English or a French imagination, would probably as a general thing be appalling. The natural remark, in the almost lurid light of such an indictment, would be that if these things are left out, everything is left out. The American knows that a good deal remains; what it is that remains - that is his secret, his joke, as one may say. It would be cruel, in this terrible denudation, to deny him the consolation of his national gift, that 'American humour' of which of late years we have heard so much ...

(James 1986a: 109)

The first part of this passage seems to confirm that James's intention is at least partly ironic. First of all, James distances himself from the criticism implied by his negative catalogue by using the passive construction "Some such list \textit{might be drawn up}". Then he implies that in any case such a list is out-dated (it would apply "especially" to America "forty years ago") and further that its contents \textit{might} ("probably as a general thing") appal a \textit{European} ("English or French") imagination. He then acknowledges the hyperbolic nature of the list (the "indictment" is "lurid") and seems to suggest that the \textit{American} view of his own country is better-informed: he "knows" what remains. It is at this point that the tone seems to shift again, however. What does the American know? Apparently nothing. In the final sentence of the paragraph, James's irony (note the mocking tone of the words "cruel" and "terrible") is directed at the notion of "American humor" (the inverted commas expressing James's
disdain) which, he implies, is more self-trumpeted than self-evident (we have heard of it, but not seen it).

The apparent reluctance, or inability, of American writers either to relinquish entirely their feelings of inferiority or to proclaim them whole-heartedly may have a common explanation - the desire to be seen as exceptional. That is to say, if Thoreau had simply refuted the notion that American culture was impoverished, his own efforts to rise above that poverty of thought would have been implicitly diminished. Conversely, if James had been too vociferous in his assertion of the inferiority of American art, would he not have implicitly condemned himself? The ambiguity of James's negative catalogue (and of Hawthorne's and Cooper's) betrays an uneasiness derived from a consciousness of the irony involved in an American artist denying the possibility of American art in a work of American art. Through the very act of enumerating the difficulties of being an artist in America, they transcend those difficulties (or undermine the force of their own arguments, depending on which way you look at it). Moreover, Cooper, Hawthorne and James - as novelists - had a particular interest in emphasising the immaturity of American culture, because it was the (self-appointed) task of the American novelist to write the great work that would put America on the global literary map.

In part, one can see the development of the American novel as a self-conscious attempt to create a national epic. Waldo Frank read *Huckleberry Finn* that way and saw in this evidence of American degeneration.

Huck is America ... Huckleberry Finn is the American epic hero. Greece had Ulysses. America must be content with an illiterate boy.

(Frank 1972: 39)

Twain's novel was not the first, or most obvious attempt in this vein, however. Thirty-four years earlier, Melville's *Moby Dick* was published. Epic in conception and
execution ("To produce a mighty book, you must choose a mighty theme") and
signalling its intention to produce an American myth through what Tony Tanner has
called "the slightly improbable spectrum of the crew", Melville's novel at first sight
could not be more different from Twain's (Melville 1988: 466, ix). Yet both novels are
quests for identity and for freedom; rites of passage, narrated by characters who end
up as orphans, free but alone (and hence as symbols of America itself, which orphaned
and freed itself through the revolution). In Ahab's obsession with slaying the whale
that has stricken him - an obsession fuelled by the conviction that it is his divinely-
ordained destiny to do so - and in Huck and Jim's flight from metaphorical and literal
slavery, respectively, one can see an allegory of the American struggle for
independence. These two novels are what may be called the foundation-texts of the
American novel and most of the subsequent attempts to write what (in a self-
mythologising move that is typically American) has come to be known as the Great
American Novel, can be divided into two camps - those that adopt a microcosmic
approach akin to Twain's, and those that aim for Melville's grand scope.*

Among modern American novelists, the one who has spoken most candidly
about the pursuit (his own and others') of the Great American Novel is undoubtedly
Norman Mailer. He has repeatedly construed the American literary scene as an arena

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* Many American novels explicitly invoke America in their titles, which is itself
revealing. There are no novels called Great Britain, or An English Tragedy, because
ideas of Britishness or Englishness do not preoccupy British or English artists in the
way that ideas of Americanness do American artists.

As Henry James noted:

It is hard to imagine two or three Englishmen, two or three Frenchman, two or
three Germans comparing notes and strongly differing as to the impression made
upon the civilized world by the collective body of their countrymen ... We are the
only people with whom such a question can be in the least what the French call an
actuality.

(James 1986b: 7)
in which rival writers compete with each other for artistic supremacy and he has been pugnacious (at times even pugilisitic) in fighting his corner. In an imaginary lecture entitled "The Dynamic of American Letters," Mailer defines the purpose of the American novel as "the task of explaining America" (Mailer 1967: 99) and argues that those best suited to this task were immigrants.

The people who were most American by birth ... gave themselves a literature which had the least to say about the real phenomena of American life ... That sort of literature and that kind of attempt to explain America was left to the sons of immigrants who now had the opportunity to see that America was a phenomenon never before described, indeed never before visible in the record of history.

(Mailer 1967: 96)

This opportunity was missed, however, and the Great American Novel remained unwritten.

No writer succeeded in doing the single great work which would clarify a nation's vision of itself ... no one novel came along which was grand and daring and comprehensive and detailed ...

(Mailer 1967: 99)

After Dreiser, according to Mailer, "the novel gave up any desire to be a creation equal to the phenomenon of the country itself" (Mailer 1967: 99). Although he never actually says so, there is of course one novel that fulfils all the criteria that he invokes here for the Great American Novel. Written by an immigrant, grand and daring in design, comprehensive and detailed in execution, overtly preoccupied with the fate of America as a nation, an attempt to explain the phenomenon of America: The Naked and The Dead is all these things.

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7 Mailer has literally come to blows with Gore Vidal (Mailer's account of this incident appears in an essay entitled "Of a Small and Modest Malignancy, Wicked and Bristling with Dots", collected in Pieces & Pontifications [Mailer 1982: 13-82]), as well as raining figurative blows on many of his contemporaries.
Set during the Second World War (one of the defining moments of American history), Mailer's first novel follows the fortunes of the I and R platoon of the 460th Infantry Regiment in the Pacific campaign against the Japanese on the island of Anopopei. Like the crew of the Pequod, the members of the I and R platoon span a conveniently diverse range of nationalities, religions and classes. Mailer employs a number of different structural devices that enable him to pull back from the mainstream of the narrative and contextualise the events of the war. Chief among these are the explanatory episodes entitled "The Time Machine," which detail the origins and backgrounds of each of the main characters, and the passages of exemplary dramatic exchanges between the men entitled "Chorus," which emphasise their collective identity. Throughout the novel these two opposing forces - difference and conformity, the individual and the group (which are the essential opposing forces that have always been at work in American society) - are in conflict with one another.8

The dread of isolation - of victimisation - is strong. When Minetta tells Goldstein about the death of a soldier in hospital, he is amazed at the strength of the reaction.

"It's a funny thing about you Jews. You know you feel sorrier for yourself and sorrier for everybody else than most people do."

(Mailer 1983: 402)

Roth, the other Jew in the platoon, takes exception to this remark and an argument develops in which Goldstein and Roth take opposite views. Goaded by Minetta's parody of his deliberate speech, Roth exclaims

8 Rupert Wilkinson identifies the "dual attraction of Americans to individualism and to 'getting together' " as the perennial dialectic of American life (Wilkinson 1988: 2).
"Who are you to say what I feel? I never detected any similarities in Jews. I consider myself an American."
Goldstein shrugged. "Are you ashamed?" he asked softly.  

(Mailer 1983: 403)

Roth's defensiveness is in part the anxiety of the soldier for whom acceptance as part of a unit is not only socially desirable, but militarily imperative, but his designation of himself as American is not simply the product of wartime exigencies or the result of obeying orders: it is an explanation, deemed sufficient in itself, of Roth's self - of both his difference from, and kinship with, the other men in the platoon. This is the vision of America that we find in Mailer's novel - the Americanness of the American soldiers in The Naked and the Dead is simply the consciousness that they are American; in every other sense they are divided - by language, by culture, by class. Just as it was for Franz Kafka, for Mailer it is the idea of America - America as an imaginative construct rather than as an actual geographical or cultural entity - that is important.

Again and again in American novels we find the words "America" and "American" used in this talismanic way - as symbols, as repositories for ideas and ideals, as mysteriously self-explanatory artefacts. We can trace this phenomenon back to perhaps the first serious American novel to invoke the nation in its title: Henry James's novel The American.9

Throughout his life, James spoke of writing a great American novel, without ever specifying precisely what he meant by this - what would be American about it. The American might well have been an early attempt at such a work, but what exactly it is about Christopher Newman, the hero of the novel, that makes him distinctively, even generically "American," is not self-evident. More than anything, it seems to

9 Actually published in its original form before Huckleberry Finn, but revised heavily later on in James's career. I shall be quoting from the Penguin Classics edition, which is based on the original version.
reside in the view that others have of him. This is not simply the ordinary social mechanism of external self-construction as Proust describes it ("our social personality is a creation of the thoughts of other people" [Proust 1987: 20]), it is more that, for his European hosts, Newman has no social personality, is allowed no selfhood other than that of The American. They regard him not as an individual, but as a cultural curiosity.

"I have been telling Madame de la Rocheffidèle that you are an American," she [Madame de Cintré] said, as he [Christopher Newman] came up. "It interests her greatly. Her father went over with the French troops to help you in your battles in the last century, and she has always, in consequence, wanted greatly to see an American. But she has never succeeded till to-night. You are the first - to her knowledge - that she has ever looked at."

(James 1986b: 216)

Named after Columbus and with an obviously symbolic surname, Christopher is clearly meant in a sense to embody or represent America, but Madame de Rocheffidèle's desire to see "an American" is on one level absurd, as is Madame de Cintré's manner in addressing Newman as though he personally had taken part in the American Revolution. It is as though one American is indistinguishable from another, or rather perhaps as though in seeing one American, you have seen them all. Ultimately, it is Newman's perceived "Americanness" that the Bellegardes resent and that causes them to foil his intended marriage to Claire.

There is a curious inversion of this situation in Dos Passos's *U.S.A.*, in a brief episode in which Eveline Hutchins is wooed by a young Frenchman, Rauol Lemmonier, who rather precipitately proposes marriage:

"Charmante Eveline, would you like to be my wife? It could be arranged, don't you know. My uncle who is the head of the family is very fond of Americans."

(Dos Passos 1983: 520)
This view of Americans as a uniform species is not confined to French aristocrats, however. As we have seen earlier, complaints about Americans being common (both in the sense of vulgarity and in the sense of sharing traits) are commonly made by Americans. For exiled Americans, during a war, however, this conformity becomes a cause for celebration. From the aristocratic Richard Ellsworth Savage, to the businessman J.Ward Moorhouse (born on the fourth of July), to the naval recruit Joe Williams, all the protagonists of *U.S.A.* find themselves grateful, even exultant, when they encounter fellow Americans abroad.\(^{10}\)

Dos Passos's trilogy unabashedly declares its intention of being "a creation equal to the phenomenon of the country itself", not just through its title but in its stylistic and structural strategies. Indeed, *U.S.A.* has many important affinities with *The Naked and the Dead*. Like Mailer's novel it is (for the most part) set during wartime (in this case the Great War); just as Mailer did in *The Time Machine*, Dos Passos provides detailed biographies for all his major protagonists (who represent a broad cross-section of American society). Although *U.S.A.* is essentially a work of dogged social realism, Dos Passos also incorporates avant-garde techniques (the main narratives are periodically interrupted by sections entitled *Camera Eye* - an elliptical first-person stream-of-consciousness voice- and *Newsreel* - snatches of contemporary newsstories and popular songs) that invest the whole enterprise with a sense of comprehensiveness.

In this respect, Dos Passos's novel is exemplary, for, as Martin Amis suggests,  

\(^{10}\) This sudden joyous identification of and with other Americans is also experienced by Gertrude Stein in *Wars I Have Seen*. At the close of the journal, she describes an encounter with three American soldiers: "after almost two years of not a word with America, there they were, all three of them" (Stein 1984: 245). Later the same day, she and Alice Toklas invited two soldiers to spend the night with them.

How we talked that night, they just brought all America to us, every bit of it, they came from Colorado, lovely Colorado, I do not know Colorado, but that is the way I felt about it, lovely Colorado ...

(Stein 1984: 246)
in a sense every ambitious American novelist is genuinely trying to write a novel called *USA*. Perhaps ... it is an inescapable response to America - to twentieth-century America, racially mixed and mobile, twenty-four hour, endless, extreme, superabundantly various. American novels are big all right, but partly because America is big too.

(Amis 1986: 1)

The conjunction of this upstart country and upstart medium - both of them vast in scale, diverse in character and democratic in impulse - has produced a remarkably fertile and sophisticated aesthetic form and one that is recognisably different in its concerns and sensibilities from its European counterpart. What is it that makes American novels different, recognisably *American*? Their preoccupation with being American, with anatomising and explaining America.

More than any other nation, America has at the centre of its culture the desire for a culture - a cohesive, homogeneous culture; at the centre of its identity a desire for an identity - a common, conformist identity. As Rupert Wilkinson observes, "the search for an American character is part of that character" (Wilkinson 1988: 2). At the same time, individuality is prized, the idea of an autonomous self cherished; no other constitution places so much emphasis on the rights of the individual. This paradox is visible in the very name of the country - the *United States* - which tries to reconcile the two impulses. Because of the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural nature of the populace, because of the spatial, temporal and climatic differences between different areas of America, because of the demographic volatility of American society, no one can be sure that their experience of, or idea of, Americanness bears any resemblance to any one else's. However, in spite of (or because of) this diversity of experience, great efforts have been made, and continue to be made, to construct a national identity. In particular, certain activities are constructed as paradigms of Americanness (ways of explaining the American self) and in the rest of this chapter I intend to look at the fictional treatment of three such paradigms - baseball, business, and self-creation - and their relationship to the grand American themes of myth, history and conformity.
Myth Vs. History: Philip Roth and The Baseball Novel

In an essay entitled "Writing American Fiction", published in 1961, Roth wrote:

the American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make credible much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meager imagination.

(Roth 1985b: 176)

Roth emphasises that his analysis of "the unfriendly relations that exist between the writer and the culture" (Roth 1985b: 186) is not simply another reiteration of the conventional theme.

Much has been made, much of it by the writers themselves, of the fact that the American writer has no status, no respect, and no audience. I am pointing here to a loss more central to the task itself, the loss of a subject ... a voluntary withdrawal of interest by the fiction writer from some of the grander social and political phenomena of our times.

(Roth 1985b: 180)

Whereas earlier American novelists felt hindered by the uneventfulness - the dull conventionality - of American society, modern American novelists, Roth suggests, flounder amidst a ceaseless, turbulent stream of extraordinary events. Where there used to be a lack of material there is now a superabundance. In the face of this bizarre actuality, Roth argues, America's finest novelists have retreated into a sort of "literary onanism", a solipsistic world in which "The writer thrusts before our eyes ... personality, in all its separateness and specialness" (Roth 1985b: 187, 186). Later on, of course, Roth made a career out of a sort of literary (and literal) onanism, taking the specialness of the personality and the solipsism of the modern writer as his subjects,
but in 1961 Roth was essentially a Jamesian realist who believed that "to the writer the community is, properly, both subject and audience" (Roth 1985b: 190).

Indeed, Roth echoes James's views on the relationship between the artist and society when he writes:

for a writer of fiction to feel that he does not really live in his own country ... must seem a serious occupational impediment. For what will his subject be? (Roth 1985b: 177)

Roth's rhetorical question is typically American in its premises (would a European writer alienated from his country be at such a loss? would a European writer think of his country as a "subject" at all?) and begs many questions. What is "the community" for a modern American writer? Are phrases such as "the American writer" and "American reality" misleading reifications of amorphous concepts? What does Roth himself understand by the term "American" and his relation to it?

At times, he is as insistent as his namesake in The Naked and the Dead on his Americanness.

America is the place I know best in the world. It's the only place I know in the world. My consciousness and my language was shaped by America. I'm an American writer in ways that a plumber isn't an American plumber or a miner an American miner or a cardiologist an American cardiologist. Rather, what the breast is to the cardiologist, the coal to the miner, the kitchen sink to the plumber, America is to me. (Roth 1985b: 128)

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11 For many Irish writers, their country certainly has been a subject in Roth's sense, but often being in a state of exile (literal or metaphorical) has served to heighten and enrich, rather than diminish and impoverish, their compulsion to write about it (as is indeed also the case with many American writers - the loss of a subject can be a subject, those alienated from a community can themselves form a community).
The rhetoric here is reminiscent of that used by Bellow to refute the label of "Jewish writer". However, Roth is embracing a label - that of American writer - and, moreover, implying that to be an American writer is ipso facto to write about America, to take America as your subject. How far does his own fiction bear this out?

The working titles of Roth's third book apparently included The American Way, An American Saint and An American Girl and there are indications in the novel that Roth was aiming at some sort of American myth with the story of Lucy Nelson. The name of her hometown is Liberty Center, located in "the middle of America", and her husband-to-be, Roy, taunts her for her conventionality by calling her "Typical American Girl" (Roth 1967: 109).

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12 Cf p.228.

13 See Rogers 1978: 71. The last of these titles carries an echo of Roth's short story of 1960, entitled "The Good Girl", in which the germ of the novel may be found. Although her family background could not be more different from Lucy Nelson's (her parents are wealthy middle-class professionals, Lucy's father is an alcoholic wastrel and her mother is a weak-willed piano-teacher), the heroine of the story, Laurie Bowen, anticipates her in many ways. The story follows the events of one night during which Laurie goes on a date with her boyfriend Richard while her parents host a party. Saying goodbye to Richard on her doorstep at the end of the evening, Laurie refuses the kiss that Richard attempts "with scornful virtue" (Roth 1960: 99) - a perfect description of the way in which Lucy thwarts Roy's advances in When She Was Good. As she enters the apartment, Laurie is shocked by scenes of debauchery. She encounters her mother's best friend - the drunk, voyeuristic Cynthia Lasser - in an embrace with her father, who always asks her, on her return from a date "A good girl?" (Roth 1960: 103). Disgusted by the depravity of her parents, Laurie struggles to articulate her disillusionment and despair, managing only to scream "Nobody's any different!" (Roth 1960: 103). Laurie's anger at the failure of her parents to fulfil their duty to her - to be role-models of responsible behaviour - is expressed more pointedly by Lucy Nelson, in her anguished rejoinder to her grandfather Willard, when he reminds her of her parents' authority over her: "Then why don't they act like parents!" (Roth 1967: 23).

14 This interpretation is reinforced by Roth's description of Lucy as "the solemn Gentile girl pitted against her father, the Bacchus of Hometown, U.S.A." (Roth 1985b: 66).
Alex Portnoy also constructs a mythical American girl - "Thereal McCoy! In her blue parka and her red earmuffs and her big white mittens - Miss America" - who represents the possibilities of America itself: "America is a shikse nestling under your arm whispering love love love love love!" (Roth 1986: 139, 135). Like a latter-day sexual Columbus (whom he plays in an early school production), Alex lays claim to America by laying her daughters.

I don't seem to stick my dick up these girls, as much as I stick it up their backgrounds - as though through fucking I will discover America. Conquer America ... I pledge allegiance to the twat of the United States of America - and to the Republic for which it stands: Davenport, Iowa! Dayton, Ohio! Schenectady, New York, and neighboring Troy! Fort Myers, Florida! New Canaan, Connecticut! Chicago, Illinois! Albert Lea, Minnesota! Portland, Maine! Moundsville, West Virginia! Sweet land of shikse-tail, of thee I sing! From the mountains, To the prairies, To the oceans, white-with-my-fooaahhhmmm! God bless A-me-ri-cuuuuhhhh! My home, SWEET HOOOOOOHHHH-M! (Roth 1986: 214-5)

Portnoy's parodic litany illustrates the ambivalence with which he regards America - he longs to be a part of it, to possess it as he possesses his shikses, and at the same time to dismiss it, to vanquish it, to triumph over it. By "whacking off" to a recital of American place-names, Portnoy corporealiseth Whitman's spiritual ecstasy, proving himself in one sense the greater patriot, but in another, a blasphemer of the poet's national religion. As a self-righteous student, Alex composes a radio play Let Freedom Ring! ("a morality play whose two major characters are named Prejudice and Tolerance"); as a self-righteous adult he prescribes U.S.A. for Mary Jane's edification, and boasts of his duties as a public servant (he is Assistant Human Opportunities Commissioner for the mayor of New York [Roth 1986: 156]). Yet Portnoy's Complaint is more concerned with sexual than national politics.
In *My Life as a Man*, the narrator, Peter Tarnopol, repeatedly equates the two, seeing his private traumas as analogues for public crises. At the height of his marital troubles he informs us that "all the while Maureen and I were locked in this bruising, painful combat ... the newspapers and the nightly television news began to depict an increasingly chaotic America" (Roth 1974: 269).

In the spring of 1963, for instance, when for nights on end I could not get to sleep because of my outrage over Judge Rozenweig's alimony decision, police dogs were turned loose on the demonstrators in Birmingham, and just about the time I began to imagine myself plunging a Hoffritz hunting knife into Maureen's evil heart, Medgar Evans was shot to death in his driveway in Mississippi.

(Roth 1974: 269)

Tarnopol goes on to note the coincidence of the publishing of the report of the Warren Commission with the publishing of his analyst Dr. Spielvogel's article on him and, in a typically pre-emptive Rothian manoeuvre, to register the incongruity between such comparisons:

I was hardly the globe's most victimized inhabitant. I had only Maureen to contend with - what if I were of draft age, or Indochinese, and had to contend with LBJ? What was my Johnson beside theirs?

(Roth 1974: 273)

Despite Tarnopol's acknowledgment that he is comparing great things with small, the implied link between the fate of the nation and the individual is at least partially serious and has precedents both in Roth's own work and in that of other American authors. However, this hardly amounts to the direct engagement with "the

15 In an essay of 1974, entitled "Writing and the Powers That Be", Roth avows that he
grander social and political phenomena" of American life that Roth prescribes for the American novelist.

There are times when Roth's writing is overtly political. As early as 1957, in a piece called "Positive Thinking on Pennsylvania Avenue," he is exposing the rhetorical evasions of Eisenhower and in 1974, in an article entitled "Our Castle," he casts Ford as Klamm to the American public's Land Surveyor K in a resetting of Kafka's The Castle. It is for Richard Nixon, however, that Roth reserves his real indignation. In "Writing American Fiction" he had highlighted the surreal nature of Nixon's television appearances.

Perhaps as a satiric literary creation, he might have seemed "believable," but I myself found that on the TV screen, as a real public figure, a political fact, my mind balked at taking him in.

(Roth 1985b: 176)

Eleven years later, with Nixon President, Roth turned him into a "satiric literary creation". In Our Gang Roth attacked the corruption, incompetence and rhetorical

associated the rhetoric employed by the heroine of When She Was Good to disguise from herself her vengeful destructiveness with the kind of language our government used when they spoke of "saving" the Vietnamese by means of systematic annihilation ... 

(Roth 1985b: 11)

F. Scott Fitzgerald was fond of imbuing his characters' fates with political resonance and in "The Crack-Up" he treats his own biography as a microcosmic version of America's history during his lifetime. He begins his essay by drawing attention to the coincidence between the American twenties and his own twenties (he was born in 1896) and ends by reflecting that his happiness during this period was not the natural thing but the unnatural - unnatural as the Boom; and my recent experience parallels the wave of despair that swept the nation when the Boom was over.

(Fitzgerald 1965: 56)
The absurdity of Nixon's administration in the form of a grotesque farce, which, however, turned out to be scarcely more grotesque or farcical than the reality. Looking back on Nixon's administration three years later, Roth remarked that

"The wonder of Nixon (and contemporary America) is that a man so transparently fraudulent ... could have passed himself off ... as, of all things, an American."

(Roth 1985b: 12)

It is not entirely clear what Roth intends "American" to mean here. He notes that Americans "generally require at least a little something of the 'human touch' in their leaders" and suggests that, had Nixon been depicted in a Norman Rockwell drawing, it would have been as "the fuddy-duddy floorwalker or the prissy math teacher ... never the country judge, the bedside doctor, or the trout-fishin' dad", but despite this distancing tactic, Roth seems himself to participate in this idealised Rockwellian world to a certain extent, to invoke a system of archetypal "American" values, from which Nixon deviates (Roth 1985b: 12).

As though to emphasise how suspect Nixon's credentials as an American are, the character of Tricky Dixon in Our Gang chooses as his pretext for the invasion of Denmark the fact that they are harbouring an ex-baseball player, Curt Flood. Dixon claims that Flood has brought a legal action against Organized Baseball which, if he were victorious,

"would inevitably lead to the death of the great game that has probably done more to make American boys into strong, decent and law-abiding men than any single institution in the land. Frankly, I do not know of a better way for our enemies to undermine the youth of this country, than to destroy the game of baseball and all it represents."

(Roth 1971: 98)

16 Bellow would disagree. He suggests that Nixon's "entire life was a perfect display of Saturday Evening Post covers" (Bellow 1976: 77).
This bogus plot reveals the extent of Dixon's perfidy (he threatens Americans with the destruction of their national game) and directly anticipates the conspiracy at the end of *The Great American Novel*, which, of all Roth's novels, is the most sustained imaginative assault on the American experience.

The special place in American iconography occupied by baseball is touched on in *Portnoy's Complaint*, when Alex rhapsodises on the sense of freedom he feels as a center fielder ("how truly glorious it is out there, so alone in all that space ... ") and opposes his enthusiasm to the sterile platitudes of Rabbi Warshaw: "uttering beautiful banalities ... is to him what playing baseball is to me!"(Roth 1986: 66, 69). For the young Alex, baseball represents an attractive, American alternative to the Jewish rituals of devotion.

For the young Roth, too, baseball was important

not simply for the fun of playing it (fun was secondary, really), but for the mythic and aesthetic dimension that it gave to an American boy's life - particularly to one whose grandparents could hardly speak English. For someone whose roots in America were strong but only inches deep ... baseball was a kind of secular church ...

(Roth 1985b: 236)

Baseball provided a quick route to assimilation for many Jews, a convenient means of declaring themselves as Americans.17 For Roth, however, it did more than

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17 In addition to Roth and Malamud (whose novel *The Natural* I shall go on to discuss), other baseball novels written by American Jews include Eliot Asinof's *The Man on Spikes* and *Eight Men Out* (the latter depicts the events of the notorious "fixed" World Series of 1919, to which both Malamud and Roth allude in their novels); Eric R. Greenberg's *The Celebrant*, Mark Harris's tetralogy (*The Southpaw, Bang the Drum Slowly, A Ticket for a Seamstitch, It Looked Like For Ever*), Jerome Charyn's *The Seventh Babe*, and Norman Keifetz's *The Sensation*. For a discussion of some of these novels, see Whitfield 1984: 172-179.
this: it activated his literary imagination. Before he was old enough to enjoy the real thing,

baseball - with its lore and legends, its cultural power, its seasonal associations, its native authenticity, its simple rules and transparent strategies, its longeurs and thrills, its spaciousness, its suspensefulness, its heroics, its nuances, its lingo, its "characters," its peculiarly hypnotic tedium, its mythic transformation of the immediate - was the literature of my boyhood.

(Roth 1985b: 238)

Roth was not the first writer to see baseball in this way, or the first to convert this literature of childhood into an adult literary subject. Amongst his predecessors, Roth mentions his admiration for the "ingenuity" of stories by Ring Lardner, Bernard Malamud, Mark Harris, J.F. Powers and Isaac Rosenfeld. I suspect that the name of the narrator of The Great American Novel is taken from one of the characters in Lardner's stories (the third baseman Smitty, who appears in both "Alibi Ike" and "Women"). However, the most important of these writers for Roth seems to have been Malamud.

In his essay on "Writing American Fiction," Roth says, of Malamud's depiction of baseball in The Natural, that it

is not baseball as it is played in Yankee Stadium but a wild, wacky game, where a player who is instructed to knock the cover off the ball promptly steps up to the plate and does just that: the batter swings and the inner core of the ball goes looping out to center field, where the confused fielder commences to tangle himself in the unwinding sphere; then the shortstop runs out and, with his teeth, bites the center fielder and the ball free from one another.

(Roth 1985b: 183)

18 Roth parodies this scene in The Great American Novel in his description of those occasions when the one-armed fielder Bud Parusha, who has to transfer the ball to his mouth after a catch before returning it to the infield, finds it lodged there.

Roland Agni would race over from centre and Nickname would tear out from second to try and save the day, but not even those two together, performing the
For Roth's purposes in 1961, this represented another instance of the American writer's "voluntary withdrawal" from American reality but of course the fantastic, or rather fabular, version of baseball that we find in *The Natural* has more to do with the fact that for Malamud, as for Roth himself, it is not the game itself, so much as what it represents - or can be made to represent - that is of interest (Roth 1985b: 124).

Malamud, in fact, is at pains to let us know that his novel isn't really about baseball at all.

In a note before the start of the novel proper, he assures us that

*The Natural* is understandable without a knowledge of baseball (in fact it is not a sports story); but for those who would rather find their mystery in plot and symbol the notes on pages 239-248 may be helpful.

(Malamud 1963: 8)

There is a comparable moment in Robert Coover's second novel, *The Universal Baseball Association*, when we learn that the apparently baseball-obsessed hero (or anti-hero) J. Henry Waugh's fascination is

Not [with] the actual game so much - to tell the truth, real baseball bored him - but rather the records, the statistics, the balances between individual and team, offense and defense, strategy and luck, accident and pattern, power and intelligence. And no other activity in the world had so precise and comprehensive a history, so specific an ethic, and at the same time, strange as it seemed, so much ultimate mystery.

(Coover 1971: 48)

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play as they had practiced it - Agni kneeling on Bud's chest, forcing open his jaws like a fellow about to stick his head in the mouth of a crocodile, and young Damur, with those quick hands of his, yanking and jiggling at the ball for all he was worth - were able to prevent the four runs from scoring.

(Roth 1973: 120)
For Smitty, the narrator of *The Great American Novel*, the importance of baseball lies in that very claim to a "comprehensive ... history" that so fascinates Waugh. His purpose in writing about the Patriot League is not simply to recover a series of forgotten sporting episodes, but to expose "a rewriting of our history as heinous as any ordered by any tyrant dictator abroad" (Roth 1973: 16).

For Malamud, Coover and Roth, then, baseball is significant not simply - or even primarily - as a sport, but as a cultural phenomenon with mythical resonance which also prides itself on its history - the very qualities that American writers have always found to be lacking in their culture. It is the tension between these two qualities - between the desire for a verifiable, unimpeachable record of the game and the conversion, or perversion, of that desire into folklore, that drives these three baseball novels.

Coover's novel begins in the midst of what seems to be a major league baseball game, with Henry Waugh part of a rapt crowd ("He saw beers bought and drunk, hot dogs eaten, timeless gestures passed" [Coover 1971: 3]). When we switch abruptly from the scene in the ball-park to a more domestic milieu ("Henry ... squinted at the sun over Pioneer Park, then at his watch: nearly eleven, Diskin's closing hours. So he ... hurr[ied] downstairs to the delicatessen to get a couple sandwiches"), we assume that he is watching a televised match (Coover 1971: 4). It is only when Henry's vision of the game persists, even as he makes his way to the delicatessen, that we begin to realise that the game is not a real one at all, but an imaginative one being played out in Henry's head.

As it turns out, Henry's game is, and is not, imaginary. On the one hand, it is a purely mathematical exercise: the game is governed by a complex set of rules, every incident is determined by a series of throws of the dice and recorded meticulously in "the Book". At the same time, however, Henry endows each player with a unique
history and personality and invents an incredibly detailed environment in which they exist - a whole world in fact, complete with its own politics, history and mythology. As the novel proceeds, this world, which is so much more vital, so much more real, than Henry's own, comes increasingly to subsume it, until, at the end of the novel, it is all that is left.

The hero of this fictional world within a fictional world is a rookie pitcher, Damon Rutherford, son of an old-time hero (Brock Rutherford) of Henry's league, the Universal Baseball Association (or the UBA for short).\textsuperscript{19} As the novel begins, Damon is on the threshold of a unique achievement: "his sixth straight win ... and maybe more. Maybe: immortality" (Coover 1971: 4). This is "More than just another ball game now: history!" (Coover 1971: 3). Much of the excitement of the game for Henry resides in the notion that he is a historian, witnessing and recording not just the feats of the stars like Damon, but every detail of every play in every game.

Riding home after work on the bus one day with his friend and colleague, Lou Engel, Henry begins to meditate on the question of how history is constructed:

"you can take history or leave it, but if you take it you have to accept certain assumptions or ground rules about about what's left in and what's left out."

(Coover 1971: 49)

Lou is bewildered by this remark, made abruptly and without explanation, so Henry elaborates.

"At 4:34 on a wet November afternoon, Lou Engel boarded a city bus and spilled water from his hat brim on a man's newspaper. Is that history?"

(Coover 1971: 50)

\textsuperscript{19} The closeness of this abbreviation to USA is, I am sure, deliberate.
Still disorientated, Lou vouchsafes a hesitant affirmative, to which Henry responds by asking "Who's writing it down?" (Coover 1971: 50). Henry's point is that history is nothing more or less than what is written down, recorded - it is the very act of recording that renders something historical. This is in fact what has led Henry, and indeed America itself, to choose baseball as the game: its comprehensive self-documentation, its passion for history.

"THE GREAT AMERICAN GAME," it said across the top, between the gleaming girls. Well, it was American baseball... had struck on an almost perfect balance between offense and defense, and it was that balance, in fact, that and the accountability - the beauty of the records system which found a place to keep forever each least action - that had led Henry to baseball as his final great project. (Coover 1971: 19)

Henry is an accountant by profession and when he speaks here of baseball's "accountability" he is using the term in a scientific sense, to mean that it is explicable in terms of statistics. But of course the word has another meaning. What distinguishes Damon from his father, we are told, is his "self-assurance ennobled with a sense of... what? Responsibility maybe. Accountability" and it is this sense of the word - its ethical sense - that comes to haunt Henry as the novel develops (Coover 1971: 9).

Damon succeeds in making history - pitching the perfect game - and Henry is ecstatic. His only reservation is the thought that nothing so spectacular could ever happen again, but then "the record book was, above all, a catalogue of possibilities" (Coover 1971: 23). Those possibilities include death, however, and in the next game Damon is struck fatally on the head by a ball pitched (with deliberate homicidal intent) by another rookie, Jock Casey. This incident provokes chaos and when order is restored, the UBA goes into mourning. Damon's historical immortality - his place in the record books - is of course ensured, but there remains another sort of immortality - the mythic sort - which he can attain. Sure enough, the UBA has its own maker of
myths, an ex-pitcher Sanford Shaw ("Sandy" for short), who writes folk-songs that celebrate the great characters of the league.

In a way, Sandy did them a disservice, provided them with dreams and legends that blocked off their perception of the truth. But what was the truth? Men needed these rituals, after all, that was part of the truth, too, and certainly the Association benefited by them.

(Coover 1971: 103)

Sandy is a fabulist who is himself the creation of a fabulist (Henry) who is himself the creation of a fabulist (Coover). Like Henry's book (the writing of which is itself a ritual that obscures the external facts of Henry's life - that he is a sad, lonely, aging man - in favour of an internal reality - that he has an extraordinarily powerful, novelistic imagination), Sandy's songs commemorate the life of the UBA, and, taken together, constitute a repository of lore and legends that have their own "truth". Sandy composes a song to honour Damon - which helps to console the members of the UBA - but Henry himself remains inconsolable.

Depressed and embittered by the cruel and unexpected turn of events, Henry considers taking revenge on Casey.

Supposing he just shipped Casey into the minors and to hell with the rules? He could at that. If he wanted to. Could explain it in the book. It wasn't impotence. Still, it might cause trouble. What trouble? The players ... What players? Some kind of limit there, all right, now he thought about it. He might smash their resistance, but he couldn't help feeling that resistance all the same. Their? mine; it was all the same.

(Coover 1971: 157-8)

The rules of the game are not, after all, inviolable - its mathematical accountability can be set aside with an explanation. What Henry cannot evade, however, is his sense of personal accountability to the world he has created. To betray the players would be to betray his sacred office, and how could he then explain
himself? Henry decides to proceed with his game, Casey and all, but becomes increasingly disillusioned and resolves to end the game forever once the season's fixtures are completed. Eventually, however, a situation arises in which Casey himself is one throw of the dice away from suffering the same fate as Damon. At this point, Henry's dilemma returns.

"if you killed that boy out there, then you couldn't quit, could you? No, that's a real commitment, you'd be hung up for good, they wouldn't let you go. Who wouldn't? aren't you forgetting - never mind, never mind."

(Coover 1971: 201)

Casey is killed (by an avenging linedrive by Royce Ingram, a rookie hitter) and Henry remains committed to the UBA. The semantic confusion in these two passages - Henry's vacillation between according the players of his league an independent existence and acknowledging that such an existence is purely nominal, that they are in fact merely extensions of himself - indicates the extent of Henry's personal investment in the game. In fact, the relationship between the UBA and Henry is symbiotic. We are told that "he and the association were the same age, although of course their years were reckoned differently" and that "He'd begun to take the logs in Year IX, feeling the need by then to take counsel with himself" (Coover 1971: 49-50, 51). Henry needs the UBA as much as it needs him: it is his refuge from an existence that is otherwise sterile; it makes him accountable, it gives him a purpose, a purpose that seems to be lacking in the outside world of the USA.

America is for Henry a place of constriction, of purposeless activity, of mortality. Leaving work, he observes
The streets, as always, were full of moving people, going, going, going, the endless jostling flow. They gave him somehow a vague and somber sense of fatality and closed circuits. Motion. The American scene.\(^{20}\)

(Coover 1971: 141)

Like Philip Roth's heuristic American writer, Henry rejects this world - the external world of American reality - and retreats into an introspective world, into a dialogue with himself. When Lou expresses concern at the fact that Henry has been talking to himself, Henry replies: "I've been talking to myself all my life" (Coover 1971: 160). This is in a sense what a writer of fiction does (Roth describes a writer's stories as "complicated, disguised letters to himself") and indeed Henry is as much a novelist as a historian (Roth 1985b: 180). He aspires, however, to be more than this.

Into the Book went the whole UBA, everything from statistics to journalistic despatches, from seasonal analyses to general baseball theory ... His own shifting moods, often affected by events in the league, also colored the reports, oscillating between notions of grandeur and irony, exultation and despair, enthusiasm and indifference, amusement and weariness.

(Coover 1971: 55-6)

Henry's Book is part fiction, part history, part autobiography, but also (as the capitalisation suggests), part holy book. Like Roth, Henry, talking to Lou about his experience of real baseball, identifies its power as essentially religious.

There were things about the game I liked ... I felt like I was part of something there, you know, like in church, except it was more real than any church ... and for a while I even had the funny idea that ball stadiums and not European churches were the real American holy places.

(Coover 1971: 166)

It is this sense of awe - of mystery - that Henry wishes to recreate in his own game. Whereas at the real baseball games, Henry was part of a conformist

\(^{20}\) There may be an allusion here to Henry James's book, *The American Scene*. 
congregation, worshipping at the altar of collective identity, with the players the objects of veneration, in the UBA it is the players themselves who constitute the congregation and it is his own identity - his self - that is the mysterious subject of awe.

This metaphor - Henry as ruling divinity, the UBA as his dominion - recurs several times during the first half of the novel. When Henry imagines the wake for Damon, "he saw that it was good"; when he meditates on the fate of past players "it seemed all but necessary ... name a man and you make him what he is" (Coover 1971: 115, 48), and when he compares his game to chess, he notes that

To be good, a chess player, too, had to convert his field to the entire universe, himself the ruler of that private enclosure - though from a pawns-eye view, of course, it wasn't an enclosure at all, but, infinitely, all there was. 

(Coover 1971: 156)

In the final chapter of the novel, however, the metaphor ceases to be a metaphor. Henry has disappeared altogether and all we have is a "pawns-eye view" of his world. Whereas in the preceding chapters, Henry has explained himself directly, he now does so vicariously, through the conjectures of his creations. Many years have passed in the UBA (it is season CLVII) and we find ourselves in the midst of Damonsday, an annual holiday on which the deaths of Damon and Casey are re-enacted in a strange ritual known as the Great Atonement Legend. The names of their contemporaries have now taken on the status of religious symbols ("The strange resonance those names have! well, the childhood programming, the catechism, all the mythic residue hidden away in daily life") and conflicting interpretations of the meaning of events of that season, and of their own lives, abound (Coover 1971: 222). Most of the UBA now belong to one of two political/religious groupings - the Damonites or the Caseyites.

There are dissenting voices, however.
Some writers even argue that Rutherford and Casey never existed - nothing more than another of the ancient myths of the sun, symbolised as a victim slaughtered by the monster or force of darkness. History: in the end, you can never prove a thing.

(Coover 1971: 223-4)

Cuss McCamish, a "Research Specialist in the Etiology of Homo Ludens," insists that he and his fellow creatures "are mere ideas, hatched whole and helpless, here to enact rituals of resistance and rot" and that "God exists and he is a nut" (Coover 1971: 230, 233). Another sceptic, Paul Trench, (one of the actors in the restaging of Damon's death and posthumous revenge), rejects McCamish's nihilism, feeling that it "cuts him off from any sense of wonder or mystery", in favour of an agnostic position (Coover 1971: 240). Trench longs to escape the cycle of competition, "to quit - but what does he mean, 'quit'? The game? Life? Could you separate them?" (Coover 1971: 238). Ultimately, as Raspberry Schultz (another of the participants in the Great Atonement Legend) recognises, their existence can only be maintained through the preservation of the pretense that they do exist, and that it matters that they exist.

I don't know if there's really a record-keeper up there in the sky or not ... even if there weren't, I think we'd have to play the game as though there were. (Coover 1971: 239)

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21 Henry sometimes thinks of himself in these terms. On one occasion, he "heard himself talking to a wooden kitchen table plainly, and he thought: what a drunken loony old goat you are, they oughta lock you up" (Coover 1971: 127).

22 Similar sentiments are expressed by the protagonists of Six Characters in Search of an Author and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead - two plays which, like Coover's novel, explore man's relationship with God through the analogue of a character's relationship with his author. Philip Roth also draws on this tradition in The Facts, which is framed by two letters - one from Roth to his fictional alter-ego Nathan Zuckerman and one, in reply, from Zuckerman to Roth.
Like Nietzsche, Schultz decides that if there is no god, the players will have to invent him - that their actions will only retain meaning if they believe that someone is observing and recording them. This notion - that the keeping of records is the final index of reality - is central to Bernard Malamud's baseball fable, The Natural. As it does in Coover's novel, baseball in The Natural becomes a sort of metaphysical arena in which mysterious rituals are performed. However, whereas Coover's novel becomes a theological allegory - a meditation on fate, freewill and determinism - Malamud's novel is essentially a morality tale - a battle between the forces of good and evil for the soul of the hero, Roy Hobbs.

Early on in The Natural, the young Roy Hobbs vanquishes the established baseball star, Walter ("the Whammer") Wambold, much to the delight of Walter's erstwhile admirer, Harriet Bird. For her, Hobbs's victory in the baseball duel is an event of mythic proportions - like "David jawboning the Goliath-Whammer, or was it Sir Percy lancing Sir Maldemer, or the first son (with a rock in his paw) ranged against the primitive papa?" and indeed mythical allusions abound in the book (Malamud 1963: 33). For Roy, however, what is important is the impact he makes in the record books. He vows to Harriet that "some day I'll break every record in the book for throwing and hitting" (Malamud 1963: 34). When Roy finally gets his chance to play

23 The name of Roy's team, the Knights, has an obvious mythical resonance; his bat - "Wonderboy" - is imbued with the magical properties of Excalibur; his quest, together with the Knights' manager Pop Fisher's, to win the pennant, is a reworking of the Fisher King myth (Roy's name is a pun on "roi", a pun hinted at in the remark of a woman observing him in disgrace at the end of the novel - "He coulda been a king" [Malamud 1963: 237]), and his evil temptress, Memo, Pop's daughter, is a latter-day Morgan Le Fay. The timing of Malamud's transposition of Arthurian legend to sixties America may have a political significance (the novel appeared in 1963, a tumultuous year for the Kennedy clan, whose Whitehouse administration was compared to Camelot), although the novel itself notably lacks any sense of political context. For a more detailed consideration of Malamud's use of myth in the novel, see Earl R. Wasserman's "World Ceres" and Frederick W. Turner's "Myth Inside And Out: The Natural" in Field & Field 1970.
in the major leagues (after his first attempt to break into the professional game ends prematurely in a bizarre shooting), it is, more than anything else, the prospect of breaking records - of making history - that motivates him.  

When Roy joins them, the New York Knights hold "the record for the most consecutive games lost in the whole league history, the most strike-outs, the most errors," but his first game, in which he achieves "the record for the number of triples hit in a major league debut and also the one for chances accepted in the outfield" initiates a rapid change in their fortunes (Malamud 1963: 58, 86). On the back of Roy's spectacular hitting, the Knights rise to third place in the league and Roy goes to see their owner - the sinister, sententious miser, Judge Goodwill Banner - in an attempt to renegotiate his contract. Roy's motives are more amorous than avaricious (he hopes that a raise will help him win over Memo, the coach's materialistic daughter "with a form like Miss America", with whom he is in love), but Banner tells him that money is the root of all evil and sends him away (Malamud 1963: 167). When the Knights fans hear of this, they arrange a special benefit event - "Roy Hobbs Day" - at which Roy receives "enough merchandise to furnish a fair-sized general store" (Malamud 1963: 116). Roy addresses the crowd to thank them for their generosity and vows to "do my best - the best that I am able - to be the greatest there ever was in the game" (Malamud 1963: 116). The crowd becomes uneasy in the face of Roy's audacity, fearing that he might "tempt the wrath of some mighty powerful ghosts", and sure enough, Roy's hot streak soon begins to cool (Malamud 1963: 116).

Roy's slump is as spectacular as his initial success and he is consumed by despair. Again, the record book is his index of achievement.

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24 In this sense, as in others, Roy is the archetypal all-American hero (hence the choice of Robert Redford to play him in the film version). In an essay on "European Anti-Americanism", Ludwig Marcuse quotes from a Dictionary of World Philosophy which includes among its definitions of "Americanism" the "unbridled interest in setting new records" (Marcuse 1953: 318).
He shut the hall door and flopped into bed. In the dark he was lost in an overwhelming weakness ... I am finished, he muttered. The pages of the record book fell apart and fluttered away in the wind.

(Malamud 1963: 142)

So complete is Roy's reliance on the record book for his sense of self that his vision of self-destruction, his imaginative construction of an image to represent his being "finished", is the physical disintegration - not of himself - but of the book in which his feats are documented.

Eventually, Roy's form returns when he sees Iris Lemon, a woman in the crowd, stand up in support of him. He tracks her down and安排s a meeting, at which, for the first time in the novel, Roy talks candidly about himself:

"My goddamn life didn't turn out like I wanted it to."
"Whose does?" ...
"I wanted everything." His voice boomed out in silence.
She waited.
"I had a lot to give to this game."
"Life?"
"Baseball. If I had started out fifteen years ago like I tried to, I'da been the king of them all by now."
"The king of what?"
"The best in the game," he said impatiently.
She sighed deeply. "You're so good now."
"I'da been better. I'da broke most every record there was."

(Malamud 1963: 157)

Iris represents Good in the novel to the Judge's and Memo's Evil. Her confusion over Roy's terminology is an implied criticism of Roy's moral myopia, his narrowness of vision. For Roy, just as for the members of the UBA, baseball is virtually synonomous with life, and the record book is a metonym for history. Roy measures out his life in baseball games, and the only existence that he acknowledges is that
provided by the official records of the game. When he resumes his glorious progress into baseball history, his first concern is to erase all evidence of his slump.

the best way to get even with ... the statisticians who had recorded (forever) the kind and quantity of his failures, was to smash every conceivable record. He was like a hunter stalking a bear, a whale ...

(Malamud 1963: 169)

The allusion here to Moby Dick is obvious (and one which Roth makes humorous use of in The Great American Novel) and Roy Hobbs's pursuit of records is indeed akin to Ahab's pursuit of the whale in its obsessiveness, its vengefulness, and its self-destructiveness. Like Melville's myth, Malamud's is quintessentially American, not just because Roy is a baseball player, but because he has an unerring sense of mission. Like Ahab, however, Roy's quest ends in failure, his destiny unfulfilled.

On the eve of the play-off game to decide the winners of the league and the entrants into the World Series, Roy collapses. He is told by the doctor that his career is effectively over (his blood pressure is dangerously high), but that he will be able to play in the final game of the season.

He was through - finished. Only he couldn't - just couldn't believe it. Me. I. Roy Hobbs forever out of the game? Inconceivable. He thought of the fantastic numbers of records he had broken in so short a time ... and he thought of the thousands - tens of thousands - that he had pledged himself to break.

(Malamud 1963: 195)

Because Roy explains himself in terms of his baseball career - because his ontology is contained in the record book - he can no more conceive of that career ending than most people can conceive of their lives ending. His bewilderment at the thought of ceasing to be a baseball player is illustrated by his uncertainty as to how to refer to himself ("Me. I. Roy Hobbs ... "). Just as others console themselves with the thought of living on in another world - with the idea of an after-life - Roy's consolation
is the thought of living on through the records he has set. As it turns out, however, even this is to be denied him.

Recuperating in hospital, Roy is offered a bribe by Judge Banner to lose the play-off game. Recognising that his opportunities for financial gain are going to be limited in the face of the imminent demise of his baseball career (and spurred on by his infatuation with Memo, who hints that she will marry him if he is able to keep her in the manner to which she is accustomed), Roy accepts the bribe. In the midst of the game itself, however, he decides that he cannot go through with the deal and, although he is unable to halt the Knights' defeat, Roy throws the Judge's money back in his face after the game. However, details of the bribe emerge and the novel ends with Roy reading an announcement in a newspaper by the baseball commissioner, responding to the rumours of Roy's part in the scandal:

"If this alleged report is true, that is the last of Roy Hobbs in organized baseball. He will be excluded from the game and all his records for ever destroyed."

(Malamud 1963: 238)

For Roy, this is not simply a punishment; it is the undoing of all that he has striven to achieve. The deletion of his name from the records is a symbolic death - his life is annulled, extinguished by the stroke of a pen, just as Damon Rutherford's is in *The Universal Baseball Association*. Whereas Damon's name lives on, in the popular mythology and official history of Henry's book, Roy's is destined to be forgotten, to be returned to the oblivion of anonymity. To be "excluded from the game," to be excised from the official history of baseball, to be erased from the record books: this is the fate of Roy Hobbs and also of the protagonists of Roth's baseball novel, *The Great American Novel*.

Smitty, the octogenarian ex-journalist narrator of *The Great American Novel*, is engaged in no less a task than rewriting American history. His story is not just the
story of the picaresque adventures of a homeless baseball team - the Ruppert Mundys -
during the Second World War, but "a historical novel that does not accord with the
American history with which they brainwash our children in the schools" (Roth
1973: 380). Early on in the novel, Smitty travels to Cooperstown to cast his vote in
the annual elections to the Baseball Hall of Fame, but the Hall of Fame is not what it
claims to be.

First off, as everyone knows, the Baseball Hall of Fame was founded on a
falsehood. No more than little George Washington said to his father, "Dad, it is I,
etc.," did Major Abner Doubleday invent the game of baseball on that sacred spot.
The only thing Major Doubleday started was the Civil War, when he answered the
Confederate Beauregard by firing the first shot from Fort Sumter. Yet, to this
day, shout such "heresy" in the bleachers at a Sunday doubleheader, and not only
will three out of four patrons call you crazy, but some self-styled authority on the
subject (probably a Dad with his Boy - I know the type) will threaten your life for
saying something so awful in front of innocent kids.

(Roth 1973: 16)

The analogy between the apocryphal exemplum of George Washington's honesty
and the mythical origin of baseball is not a casual one. Roth's novel is, in his own
words, a sustained attempt to "dramatise the struggle between the benign myth of itself
that a great power prefers to perpetuate, and the relentlessly insidious, very nearly
demonic reality" (Roth 1985b: 89 - 90). The founding fathers of America deliberately
promoted idealised views of themselves (and of Washington, as their figurehead,
particularly), in much the same way as Jesus's disciples did. For Smitty to suggest that
the episode of Washington's felling of the tree never actually occurred is to the
archetypal American Dad and Boy worshipping their country at the Sunday baseball as
great a heresy as to cast doubt on Christ's nativity in front of a church congregation at
prayer.

Indeed, Roth exploits the metaphor of baseball as religion (the rules as
mysterious rituals, the record book as holy book), just as Malamud and Coover before
him. Whereas his predecessors had used this metaphor seriously, however, Roth highlights its absurdity. When Ulysses S. Fairsmith, the manager of the Ruppert Mundys, states that "Baseball is this country's religion" (Roth 1973: 92), he is hardly speaking metaphorically at all. Fairsmith had opposed the advent of nighttime baseball on the grounds that it would represent a corruption of the state of purity in which the game had existed till then; that it would be, in fact, a second Fall.

"Daytime baseball is nothing less than a reminder of Eden in the time of innocence and joy; and too, an intimation of that which is yet to come. For what is a ball park, but that place wherein Americans may gather to worship the beauty of God's earth, the skill and strength of His children, and the holiness of His commandment to order and obedience ... For in the end as in the beginning, in the Paradise to come as in the Eden we have lost, it is not by the faint wattage of the electric light bulb that ye shall be judged, but rather in the unblinking eye of the Lord, wherein we are all as bareheaded fans in the open bleachers and tiny players prancing beneath the vault of His heaven."

(Roth 1973: 87)

In this passage Roth is satirising not just the inflation of baseball into a national religion, but also the venerable tradition of America as New Eden. Later on, in a parody of *Heart of Darkness*, Smitty tells the story of Fairsmith's attempt to spread the baseball gospel in Africa. Fairsmith narrowly escapes death at the hands of the natives after refusing to allow them to slide into first base on a "walk":

"I will not be the man who allowed baseball to become a primitive rite for savages. I would rather die a martyr to the national pastime, if such is the will of the Lord."

(Roth 1973: 298)

25 Two of the major sections of the novel allude to biblical episodes: the chapter dealing with the Mundy's exile from their home-ground is entitled "In the Wilderness" (a reference to the forty-year exile in the desert that precedes the Jews' arrival in the Promised Land) and the two chapters devoted to Roland Agni's attempts to leave the Mundys - "The Temptation of Roland Agni I and II") invoke Christ's desert encounter with Satan.
Fairsmith's vacuous pieties and extravagant rhetoric are ridiculous, and the humour here is typical of much of the novel in its willful excess and in its self-conscious literariness, but Roth is also making a serious point: Fairsmith's euphuistic mystification of baseball, like the myth about Doubleday's invention of the game and the legend of George Washington's honesty, is an attempt to establish an authorised, sanitised, pietised version of American history.

Like Fairsmith, Smitty uses religious imagery to characterise the relationship between the fans, players and administrators of American baseball in religious terms; unlike the Mundys' manager, however, for Smitty the analogy is between repressive hierarchies keeping their followers in ignorance in order to perpetuate their own power. Smitty sees the insidious corruption of baseball issuing not from technological innovation or the modification of the game by other peoples, but from the baseball authorities themselves. As he continues his discussion of the myth of Doubleday's invention of baseball, it becomes clear that it is important not in itself, but insofar as it is symptomatic of a larger rottenness at the core of America.

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26 In addition to The Heart of Darkness episode, there are numerous parodic allusions throughout the novel to The Natural and much of the novel's Prologue is given over to literary jokes. For example, Hemingway, who appears in the novel as an old friend of Smitty's (whom he calls "Frederico" - "that was the hard-boiled way Hem had of showing his affection, calling me by a name that wasn't my own", Smitty explains), delivers his judgments on three of the contenders for the title of Great American Novel. He dismisses Moby Dick as "a book about blubber, with a madman thrown in for excitement", Huckleberry Finn as "a book by a fellow who is thinking how nice it would be to be a youngster again ... Your old wino dad getting rubbed out without having to do the job yourself. The Great American Daydream ... " and The Scarlet Letter as "the book where the only one who has got any balls on him is the heroine" (Roth 1973: 24, 27, 28, 29). Hem's literary criticism is both a parody of his "hard-boiled" style and also a burlesque of the novels themselves.
I only draw attention to the longevity of this lie to reveal how without conscience
even the highest authorities are when it comes to perpetuating a comforting,
mindless myth everyone has grown used to, and how reluctant the ordinary
believer, or fan, is to surrender one. When both the rulers and the subjects of the
Holy Baseball Empire can sanctify a blatant falsehood with something supposedly
so hallowed as a "Hall of Fame," there is no reason to be astonished ... at the
colossal crime against the truth that has been perpetrated by America's powers-
that-be ever since 1946 ... I am speaking of the annihilation of the Patriot League.
Not merely wiped out of business, but wilfully erased from the national memory.
(Roth 1973: 16)

Of course, on one level, Smitty is as absurd a character as Fairsmith: a
"paranoid fantasist" (to use Roth's description), inhabiting a world every bit as
solipsistic as Henry Waugh's and Roy Hobbs' (Roth 1985b: 90). On another level,
however, he is the scourge of political corruption, a crusader for "the truth," a
champion of history and an enemy of myth. Roth's novel is, in fact, not just a
grotesque fantasy about a mythical baseball league populated by madmen, freaks, and
opportunists; it is also a political allegory about McCarthyism and the alacrity with
which America has written it off, written it out of its own history, refused to explain
itself. So that when Smitty confronts one of the officials of the Hall of Fame and
demands "Why must you bury the truth about the history of this game - of this
country?", he is both an embittered, lunatic old man with an idée fixe, and at the same
time an ancient-mariner-type figure, whose tale has a resonance beyond its immediate
context and a relevance that only becomes fully apparent in retrospect (Roth

Like Ring Lardner, Smitty used to write a daily column on baseball (entitled
"One Man's Opinion") for a national newspaper; he was also "the intimate of four
American presidents," whose prose he "polished" (Roth 1973: 4-5). Yet if Smitty once
had the ear of the nation, and of the men who ruled the nation, he is, as the novel
opens, far from being an influential member of the establishment, an outcast from
society. From the outset, Smitty emphasises his current status as political pariah.
To illustrate his eloquence, Smitty - full name Word Smith - begins the novel in a blaze of alliterative fireworks. Among a long list of "bs" with whom he has fraternised, he refers to "the blacklisted (myself included)" and "the Bolsheviks (some of my best friends, Mr. Chairman - what of it!)", while the list of "cs" he has visited includes "the Caucasus (Comrade Smitty - and proud of it, Mr. Chairman! [Roth 1973: 1, 2] ). He ends it by disrupting a hearing of the House Unamerican Activities Commission with another volley from his alliterative arsenal, a diatribe against the proceedings which concludes:

- unreality, Mr. Chairman, for sheer unumununun-reality, I cannot think of anything to compare with what has transpired at these hearings.  
  (Roth 1973: 372)

As a punishment for his refusal to co-operate with McCarthy, Smitty is sentenced to a year in prison and "never again did his by-line appear in an American newspaper" (Roth 1973: 372).

That the word "unreality" should be the ultimate "un," the one that caps Smitty's long list of negative adjectives to characterise the McCarthy hearings, is no coincidence: Smitty's judgement of the House Unamerican Activities Commission echoes Roth's incredulity, expressed thirteen years earlier, at the state of American life. Of all the bizarre events in the novel, none is more incredible than these hearings: McCarthy is, precisely, one of those figures that American culture "tosses up ... almost daily that are the envy of any novelist" (Roth 1985b: 176). Like Roth, Smitty wants to confront American reality in all its absurdity and, like Roth, he finds the winds of literary taste blowing against such candour.

Having seen off the attentions of one "Chairman," the Epilogue to the novel finds Smitty appealing to another. Having been rejected by every American publisher (none of whom "dares to present the American people with the true story I have told"),
Smitty writes a letter to Mao Tse-tung, exhorting him to publish his novel in the name of art and history (Roth 1973: 380).27

art for the sake of the record, an art that reclaims what is and what was from those whose every word is a falsification and a betrayal of the truth.

(Roth 1973: 381)

Censured, and censored, by the American powers-that-be, Smitty also finds himself in humiliating personal circumstances. Languishing in the Valhalla State Home for the Aged, Smitty is patronised by the nurses and ridiculed by the other residents. On the annual trip to the Hall of Fame, he is forced to listen, in impotent indignation, to the distorted baseball reminiscences of his fellow inmates.

Ninety-nine per cent of their baseball "memories," ninety-nine per cent of the anecdotes and stories they recollect and repeat are pure hogwash, tiny morsels of the truth so coated over with discredited legend and senile malarkey, so impacted, you might say, in the turds of time, as to rival the tales out of ancient mythology.

(Roth 1973: 14)

Smitty opposes his own concern for "the record," his belief in "the truth," with the "legend" and "mythology" propounded by his contemporaries. In telling the tale of the Ruppert Mundys, however, he is not simply resurrecting their reputation, he is also, by implication, vindicating himself, reclaiming his own place in history. As he admits at the start of the novel, "This is a book about what America did to the Ruppert

27 Smitty reproduces some of these refusals, which gives Roth the chance, in an entirely characteristic manoeuvre, to pre-empt criticism of his novel: one publisher denounces it as "a vicious and sadistic book of the most detestable sort ... offensive in the extreme" and another regrets that it seems "to strain for its effects and to simplify for the sake of facile satiric comment the complex realities of American political and cultural life" (Roth 1973: 378).
Mundys (and to me)" (Roth 1973: 12). In other words, his explanation of himself is also an explanation of his country; his American story is American history.

The story begins with the expulsion of the Ruppert Mundys, in 1943, from their home stadium, Mundy Park, which is to be used as an embarkation camp for U.S. soldiers for the duration of the war. For the rest of the conflict, they become a team of exiles, doomed perpetually to wander homeless across America, playing each match away. This is not the only effect that the war has on the Mundys, however. With all the fit young men recruited in the war effort, the Mundys, once the undisputed champions not only of the Patriot League, but of three consecutive World Series, are reduced to fielding a team of misfits, the flotsam and jetsam of American society. In addition to the one-legged catcher (Hothead Ptah), one-armed outfielder (Bud Parusha) and another outfielder who persistently knocks himself out against the outfield wall in pursuit of a catch (Mike Rama) with whom they start the season, the Mundys are soon joined by a midget (O.K. Ockatur) and the rest of their team (with the exception of Roland Agni) consists of a motley assortment of "has-beens, might-have-beens, should-have-beens, would-have-beens, never-weres and never-will-bes" (Roth 1973: 127). Despite this travesty of a baseball team, however, the Mundy fans continue to follow their team's progress, not so much out of loyalty as morbid fascination.

"they were transfixed, perhaps for the first time in their lives, by the strangeness of things, the wondrous strangeness of things, by all that is beyond the pale and just does not seem to belong in this otherwise cozy and familiar world of ours."

(Roth 1973: 129)

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28 There is an echo here of the words that end Roth's short story "On the Air" (which features among its cast of characters, Scoop, a mental defective with an ice-cream scoop instead of a hand): "to all those out there 'Beyond the Pale,' good night, brethren, and sweet dreams!" (Roth 1970: 49).
The Mundys are strange, unfamiliar, they do not belong. In this respect, they resemble newly-arrived immigrants in America, for whom they are indeed mistaken by an army corporal: "I took you for a bunch of war-torn immigrants just off the boat. I took you for somebody we just saved" (Roth 1973: 165). Unlike immigrants however, the Mundys' strangeness cannot be diluted in the mainstream; the Mundys cannot be integrated into America, cannot be saved; instead, they are marginalised and destroyed.

In the synopsis at the head of the second chapter, which introduces the Mundys starting line-up, we are warned that what follows is

*A distressing chapter wherein the reader is introduced to each member of the 1943 Mundys as he steps up to the plate, and comes thus to understand why Americans have conspired to remove all reminders of such a team from the history books ... Containing much matter to vex the ordinary fan and strain his credulity, which is as it must be, in that real life is always running away with itself, whereas imagination is shackled by innocence, delusion, hope, ignorance, obedience, fear, sweetness, et cetera.*

(Roth 1973: 97)

Once again, Roth contrasts the lurid improbability of "real life" in America with the comparatively anaemic "imagination" of Americans. Smitty's fear is not simply that his audience will be unable to believe that the Mundys of '43 existed, however, but that they will not want to believe that they existed. Although the Mundy fans of the time are fascinated by their team of misfits, most Americans are disgusted. Indeed, the ineptitude and transparent oddity of the Mundys are, Smitty implies, the true reasons for their enforced exile. Smitty sees this exile as a symbolic manifestation of the message that America delivers to all social deviants: "as we say so succintly in America, to the unfit, the failed, the floundering and forgotten, HIT THE ROAD, YA BUMS!" (Roth 1973: 45). For Smitty, the erasure of the Mundys and the Patriot League from the annals of baseball history is a paradigm for the scapegoating and victimising of all those Americans who, like the Mundys, "live on the fringes of the
"when you are blackballed from baseball, then verily, you are the untouchables in the United States" (Roth 1973: 113, 41). What finally renders the Mundys untouchable however, in historical as well as social terms, is their involvement in an alleged Communist plot.

The first we hear of this is when Roland Agni, the league's leading hitter, forced by his parents to play for the lowly Mundys as a lesson in humility, makes a desperate bid to join another team. At first, he offers himself to Angela Whittling Trust, the owner of the Tri-City Tycoons, but she tells him that he must remain with the Mundys, because he is "all that makes the Mundys major league" (Roth 1973: 260). Roland is bewildered: why does she care about the Mundys, why doesn't she want to ensure her side's victory in this year's race for the pennant? Angela takes pity on the distraught young batter and decides to confide in him. She cannot sign him up, she explains, because to do so would be to play into the hands of a Communist conspiracy to discredit baseball by turning it into a laughing-stock, thus undermining the spirit of America.

"What does hold this nation together, Roland? ... what is it that links in brotherhood millions upon millions of American men, makes kin of competitors, makes neighbors of strangers, makes friends of enemies, if only while the game is going on? Baseball! And that is how they propose to destroy America, young man, that is their evil and ingenious plan - to destroy our national game!"

(Roth 1973: 261)

Unconsoled by the knowledge that in staying with the Mundys he is performing his patriotic duty, likewise undeterred by the revelation that in deserting them he would be helping the Communists to undermine the foundations of American society, Roland switches his attentions, after his rebuff at the Tycoons, to their city rivals, the
Greenbacks, but this too ends in failure. At the beginning of the next season, therefore, Roland refuses to play, in protest at his plight. Things are not what they used to be at the Mundys, however.

Following the death of Fairsmith (who collapses after the ignominious final-day defeat against the Tycoons, his last words being "my god, why hast thou forsaken me?") the Mundys are left managerless, but the breach is soon filled by the most unexpected of candidates (Roth 1973: 314). Earlier on in the novel, Smitty had told

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29 This episode is a parody of the episode in *The Natural*, in which Roy Hobbs at first agrees, and then at the last minute refuses, to "throw" the final game of the season (which is itself based on the events of the 1919 World Series). The Greenbacks are owned by an immigrant Jew, whose son Isaac is a mathematical prodigy with ambitions to take over the running of his father's team. Despite his father's admonitions ("I didn't buy no baseball team juss for my own healt' - I bought it for yours! So you could grow up in peace an American boy!"), Isaac persists in his attempts to educate the Greenback players in his scientific theories of how the game should be played, only to be reviled and ridiculed (Roth 1973: 271). When the price of Roland's purchase proves beyond his father's means, Isaac spies his chance. He lures Roland into his laboratory underneath the stadium and proposes a plan which would enable them both to achieve their goals. Roland is to feed his teammates Isaac's special brand of "Wheaties," with the help of which they will win all their remaining games and earn Isaac (who will place a bet on just this most improbable of scenarios) a fortune. With the proceeds, Isaac will take over the Greenbacks and buy Roland from the Mundys. Everything goes according to plan until the final game of the season, when Roland, intimidated by the presence of the Commissioner of baseball, the President's wife and various other luminaries (all drawn to pay tribute to the remarkable renaissance of the Mundys) and haunted by visions of being banned from the game by the Commissioner ("you are never going to play baseball with any team again. You are banished for life, Roland Agni") fails to supply the doctored breakfast cereal (Roth 1973: 289). Unbeknownst to Roland, Isaac has bet all the winnings on the outcome of this final game and so all is lost. The extraordinary events of this game parody the record-breaking feats (and the obsession with the records) depicted in Malamud's novel.

No need to chronicle here the records compiled in a game about which tens of thousands of words were written during that fall and winter: the record number of times Hothead Ptah tripped on his mask going back for foul pop-ups, the record number of times that Mike Rama knocked himself unconscious against the left-field wall, the record number of times Specs Skimir "lost" ground balls in the sun - (Roth 1973: 313)
the story of Gil Gamesh, a star rookie pitcher with the Tri-City Greenbacks, who is about to complete his third consecutive "no-hitter" when the umpire, Mike Masterson, is distracted and fails to witness the third strike of the last opposition batsman in the final innings. With the fans baying for Mike's blood, General Oakhart, the President of the Patriot League, orders the playing of the national anthem, which instantaneously "turned sixty-two thousand savages back into baseball fans" (Roth 1973: 74). When play resumes, however, Gamesh is hit for a triple and his record blemished. In revenge, Gamesh deliberately pitches a "rising fastball ... traveling between one hundred and twenty and one hundred and thirty miles per hour" straight at Mike's throat. The umpire survives, but is rendered mute, and Gamesh is promptly banished from the league, disappearing without trace.

It is Gamesh who now suddenly returns from obscurity to manage the Mundys. He claims to have defected to Russia, been trained as a Communist agent, and to have subsequently repented (the moment of truth coming when he tunes into the World Series in the shortwave radio room of Soviet Intelligence and realises that "down beneath the dreams of glory and vengeance, beneath the contempt, the isolation, the loneliness and the hatred, I happened to be an American"), and he persuades Angela Trust and General Oakhart that the Communists are infiltrating the Patriot League (Roth 1973: 329).

Posing as a double agent, Gamesh takes charge of the Mundys, ostensibly to orchestrate the fight against his old comrades. However, it soon becomes clear that Gamesh has not recanted. He indoctrinates his team with agit-prop rhetoric, informing them that "THE RUPPERT MUNDYS ARE THE OFFICIAL SCAPEGOATS OF THE USA" and instructing them to take their revenge on those who have thus branded them: "The United States government ... The country whose flag you salute" (Roth 1973: 345). When Roland, coaxed back into playing by the team's new, hate-driven
success, stumbles upon Gamesh's plan and accuses him of trying "to destroy
America!", the manager sneers.

"America? ... Roland, what's America to you? Or me, or those tens of thousands
up in the stands? It's just a word they use to keep your nose to the grindstone and
your nose to the line. America is the opiate of the people ... "

(Roth 1973: 362)

Before Roland can respond to this, he is shot dead by a bullet intended for
Gamesh (Mike Masterson's attempted revenge). At a post-game press conference
Gamesh, with the support once more of General Oakhart (who sees the opportunity to
rekindle old political ambitions) and Angela Trust (who wants to rekindle her old affair
with Gamesh), hails Roland as an American martyr, the victim of a Communist
assassin, and publicly accuses thirteen Mundy players of being Communists. The novel
proper concludes with the subsequent trial of "the Mundy thirteen"30 (which Smitty
brings to a halt with his indignant outburst at the "shameful shenanigans" of the
Congressional committee [Roth 1973: 371] ) and a brief summary of the ensuing
events, among which is the endorsement of General Oakhart's presidential campaign by
McCarthy (the only time he is mentioned by name in the novel).

At the close of the novel, then, we find the mythical world of the Patriot League
and the Ruppert Mundys colliding with the historical world of the House Unamerican

30 Roth takes this opportunity to parody the "Blacksox" trial, in which eight members
of the Chicago Whitesox were tried (and eventually acquitted) on charges of accepting
bribes to "throw" the 1919 World Series. According to myth, a young fan accosted
one of the accused, Shoeless Joe Jackson, imploring him to "Say it ain't so, Joe!".
Malamud alludes to the story in the ending of The Natural, when Roy Hobbs,
confronted by a distraught young fan saying "Say it ain't true, Roy," "wanted to say it
wasn't but couldn't, and ... wept many bitter tears" (Malamud 1963: 238). In Roth's
version, one of the "Mundy thirteen", O.K. Ockatur, is greeted outside the courtroom
by a voice from the crowd gathered there, imploring him to "Say it ain't so, O.K.!", to
which he replies "It ain't, you little asshole!" (Roth 1973: 369).
Activities Commission and McCarthy. As Smitty is escorted from the courtroom, he is challenged with a crude version of Roth's thesis in "Writing American Fiction":

Chairman: But surely as a writer, Mr. Smith, you know the old saying that truth is stranger than fiction.

Smitty: So are falsehoods, Mr. Chairman. Truth is stranger than fiction but stranger still are lies.

(Roth 1973: 372)

What exactly is Roth up to here? Is he retreating from American reality in this novel, or satirising that retreat? As so often with Roth, he tries to have it both ways. Taken literally, the novel bears no resemblance whatsoever to American, or any other sort, of reality and its treatement of baseball is so outlandish as to make *The Natural* seem realistic but, as with *Our Gang*, Roth is dealing with a reality that is itself incredible, that is almost beyond satire, so that conventional realism seems redundant. Roth explains himself by claiming that he was, at the end of the novel, attempting to establish a kind of passageway from the imaginary that comes to seem real to the real that comes to seem imaginary, a continuum between the credible incredible and the incredible credible ... an activity something like what many of our deranged countrymen must engage in every morning, reading the newspaper on the one hand and swooning over the prophetic ingenuity of their paranoia on the other.

(Roth 1985b: 91-2)

As a fiction writer, however, Roth's paranoia is likely to be somewhat more ingenious and more prophetic (insofar as it finds public expression in his work) than that of his fellow countrymen. With *The Great American Novel*, Roth presents us with a "paranoid fantasist" whose mythical version of American history is at once transparently absurd and more real, more true, than "the U.S. Government Officially Authorised Version of Reality" (Roth 1973: 381). Like Sandy's songs in *The
Universal Baseball Association, Smitty's tall tales have their own truth, but Smitty's world (and Roth's novel) lacks the power of Waugh's world (and Coover's novel). In his anxiety to avoid Malamud's example - a baseball novel that replays ancient myths in an ahistorical and apolitical America - Roth dilutes the unreality of Smitty's myth with a dose of political reality. If, as Roth suggests, the best way of constructing a modern American myth is to "imagine a book about imagining that American myth", then it is Coover's novel that fits the bill (Roth 1985b: 92).

Fear, Regression & Conformity: Joseph Heller and the Business Novel

At one point in Coover's novel, Henry Waugh explains his absence from work to his boss, Zifferblatt. He tells him that he has been mourning the loss of a young friend, a baseball pitcher (it is Damon Rutherford, of course), and Zifferblatt meditates: "Oh yes, baseball ... The Great American game ... After business, of course" (Coover 1971: 138). Like baseball, business occupies a central position in American life, and in America's conception of itself. Until quite recently, the only respectable money in Europe was, like everything else respectable, "old" (that is, inherited) rather than "new" (that is, earned), and business was regarded as slightly vulgar. In America, however, the ideal of the self-made man (a microcosm of the self-made country) has always been sacred. It wasn't until 1885 (with the publication of William Dean Howells' The Rise of Silas Lapham) that there was a fictional treatment of this subject, but since then an identifiable tradition of American business novels has developed.

Joseph Heller's second novel, Something Happened, clearly belongs, in a sense, to this tradition, but there have only been rare and half-hearted attempts to see it in this context. David Seed suggests as antecedents Sloan Wilson's The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit and Mell Lazarus's The Boss is Crazy Too, but there seems little, beyond their common milieu, to suggest any substantial relationship between these novels and
Heller's. Heller himself is characteristically reticent on the subject of literary precedents, but is more forthcoming on the allegorical potential of the novel.

In many ways they're very much alike, Bob and America. I did intend Bob to be symbolic of, or representative of, the upper echelons of American life, though not in any obvious or over-rationalised sense.

(Heller 1975a: 59)

As with *Catch-22* (whose real subject, Heller claims, was not war but the "predicament we in this country have had ever since the end of World War II" [Heller 1970b in Kiley & McDonald 1973: 357]), and its sequel, *Closing Time* (much of which, he notes, "reflects my attitude towards American life*"), *Something Happened* seems to be less about the business world *per se* than about an American malaise (Heller 1991). Like Roth, Heller was politically active in his younger days, speaking out against the Vietnam War and content to allow *Catch-22* to be used as a stick with which to beat U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War. In *Good As Gold*, Heller turned his satirical eye (as Roth had done in *Our Gang*) on political corruption in Washington, emphasising (again like Roth) the link between the debasement of language and morality (whereas Roth's hate-figure had been Nixon, however, for Heller it is Kissinger) - a theme he returns to in *Picture This*.

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31 More commonly, in this later novel, Heller makes implicit comparisons between the democratic Athens of Aristotle's day and modern-day America. For example, Heller clearly has McCarthy in mind in the following passage describing Cleon's attempt to stigmatise those who did not agree with his policies as traitors:

Cleon thundered of a "conspiracy so immense" as to chill the heart of every red-blooded and patriotic Athenian. He claimed he could produce a list of three hundred fifty Athenians who were treasonably pro-Lacedaemonian.

(Heller 1988: 174)
After World War II, in 1947, the U.S. Department of War ... was abolished and subsequently reconstituted as the Department of Defense; the Secretary of War was renamed the Secretary of Defense.
And from that day to the present, the United States of America was never again in danger of war.
It was in danger of defense.

(Heller 1988: 272)

Gold's disillusionment with the American political system ("he knew there was no longer anything legal to be done under the American system of government to discourage crime, decrease poverty, improve the economy, or nullify the influences of neglect" [Heller 1979a:325] ) has been echoed by Heller himself in recent years, when he has spoken repeatedly of "a lack of sympathy" on the part of the affluent majority of Americans for the less-privileged, while admitting that he himself would not choose to pay more taxes to help them (Heller 1991).

While the Heller of the mid-seventies seemed reasonably sanguine about the state of American culture - in 1975 he asserted unfashionably that "There is a serious reading public in America that wants good, challenging books" (Heller 1975b in Golson 1981: 410) - by the time of Picture This he was gloomily citing Wall Street forecasts indicating that "by the end of this century, there will be ... not much interest in books [about Rembrandt]" (Heller 1988: 252). If Heller’s pessimism has increased over the years, however, his most powerful (and powerfully depressing) anatomy of American society is to be found not in Closing Time but in Something Happened.

In Picture This, the narrator observes that

Democracy and free enterprise go hand in hand and are unfriendly to each other. They go hand in hand and are deadly enemies, for the only freedom business cares about is the freedom to do business.

(Heller 1988: 162)

Heller’s choice of a businessman as his representative American in Something Happened links his novel with modern plays such as Death of a Salesman and
Glengarry Glenross, but, more importantly, with a tradition of business novels that begins not with Howells but with Sinclair Lewis - a tradition which emphasises this opposition between freedom and business.

In the years between Silas Lapham and the end of the nineteenth century, there were a handful of further novels featuring businessmen, but at the start of the new century, there was a sudden spate of American novels with businessmen as their protagonists: Frank Norris's "Wheat Trilogy" (of which only The Octopus and The Pit were completed); Theodore Dreiser's Cowperwood trilogy (again only the first two - The Financier and The Titan - were published during his lifetime); Robert Herrick's The Real World, Memoirs of an American Citizen, A Life for a Life; Abraham Cahan's The Rise of David Levinsky (whose title explicitly alludes to Howells's novel). The businessmen-heroes of these novels were entrepreneurs and tycoons and the novels themselves were usually Faustian fables about the moral sacrifices demanded by material success. In 1922, however, there appeared a novel which was to change forever the popular conception of the American businessman.

Sinclair Lewis's Babbitt was a sensational commercial success and its hero - a middle-class, middle-American real-estate salesman (or realtor, as he insists on being known) - quickly became immortalised, his name a byword for a sort of bourgeois philistine conformity. In fact, the plot of the novel (such as it is - this novel, like Heller's, is one in which very little happens) could be summarised in this way: Babbitt lives a quietly prosperous, entirely unexceptional family life and feels vaguely uneasy and dissatisfied; Babbit briefly rebels, but his initial exultation is quickly replaced by a mounting sense of panic and fear; Babbitt returns to the fold and feels mightily relieved. In other words, Lewis's novel is a dramatisation of the conflict between the

32 The final novel in the trilogy, The Stoic, was published in 1946, the year after Dreiser's death.
self and society, between individuality and conformity, which depicts society and conformity as triumphant.

The novel is set in a mythical mid-American city whose only distinguishing feature is that it has none: "A stranger suddenly dropped into the business-center of Zenith could not have told whether he was in a city of Oregon or Georgia, Ohio or Maine, Oklahoma or Manitoba" (Lewis 1991: 45). Babbitt is a typical inhabitant of this most typical of cities. He is "one of the ruling caste of Good Fellows"; he belongs to the right clubs (the Elks, the Boosters, the Chamber of Commerce, the Zenith Athletic Club), reads the right journals (the *American Magazine*), plays the right games (poker and golf), believes in the right things (the Republican Party, the Presbyterian Church, "American supremacy"), but he is not happy (Lewis 1991: 77, 72, 80). He conforms grudgingly, unenthusiastically, out of default, rather than conviction: "he ... detested the grind of the real-estate business, and disliked his family, and disliked himself for disliking them" (Lewis 1991: 7).

Even this discontent seems at first to be typical, however, part of the banal routine ("A sensational event was changing from the brown suit to the gray the contents of his pockets") by which his life is governed (Lewis 1991: 11). His dislike of his work has less to do with the ironies in which it involves him (the slogan of his company is "Homes for Folks", but his own house, we are told, "was not a home") than with the austerity of his office ("a vault, a steel chapel where loafing and laughter

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33 When Babbitt is eulogising Zenith in a speech at the annual dinner of the Zenith Real Estate Board, he quotes a passage from one of Chum Frink's poems (Frink is a populist poet who publishes in the local newspaper and whom Babbitt overhears one night, in a drunken stupor, bitterly denouncing himself):

if I should look around and buzz, and wonder in what town I was, I swear that I could never tell! ... all the fellows standing round and a-talkin' always ... the same good jolly kind of guff; bout autos, politics and stuff and baseball players of renown that Nice Guys talk in my Home Town!

(Lewis 1991: 153)
were raw sin"), which reflects the ascetic, no-frills image favoured by the business world (Lewis 1991: 32, 16, 31). Babbitt has periodic regrets about his chosen career-path, musing on the great things he might have achieved had he "had a whirl at law and politics", but consoles himself with the thought that "I've made more money as it is" (Lewis 1991: 76). Babbitt's weariness with family-life, too, is entirely conventional: he is "an average father ... affectionate, bullying, opinionated, ignorant, and rather wistful" and although he drifts into marriage without enthusiasm, lacking the resolution to contradict his girlfriend's assumption that their first kisses amounted to an engagement ("Often ... he got near to telling her that it was a mistake, but it was pleasant to have a girl in his arms"), his attitude towards her is more indifferent than resentful (Lewis 1991: 184, 76).

There is, however, something more than simple middle-aged ennui ailing Babbitt. His foiled ambition may be easily salved by the accumulation of material goods (he prides himself on possessing the latest gadgetry and most stylish accessories), his anxieties about his family may be assuaged by the occasional flattery of his wife or children, but there is a more persistent doubt that gnaws at Babbitt: self-doubt. This self-doubt (which is both literal - an uncertainty over who, or what, he is, and figurative - a lack of confidence in his abilities) manifests itself symbolically in Babbitt's unconscious.

We first encounter Babbitt at the start of the novel "dreaming of the fairy child again" - a saviour-lover who has been coming to him in his dreams "for years" to whisk him away from his humdrum existence (Lewis 1991: 6). Half-roused by the progress of the milk-truck in the street, Babbitt's stomach "constrict[s] with alarm", and through all the ensuing morning sounds "he "struggle[s] back toward his dream", "fumbl[ing] for sleep as for a drug", striving desperately to overcome the "panting tension" which threatens to take hold of him (Lewis 1991: 6-7). He succeeds in "escap[ing] from
reality till the alarm-clock rang" but then has to concede defeat ("He sulkily admitted
now that there was no more escape" [Lewis 1991: 7]).

Babbitt yearns to escape from reality into a mythical dream-world where he will
be free, and where he will be appreciated.

Where others saw but Georgie Babbitt, she [the fairy child] discerned gallant
youth. She waited for him in the darkness beyond mysterious groves. When at
last he could slip away from the crowded house he darted to her. His wife, his
clamoring friends sought to follow, but he escaped, the girl fleet beside him, and
they crouched together on a shadowy hillside.

(Lewis 1991: 6)

Despite its sexual undercurrents, this is essentially a fantasy about becoming a
child again, about regaining that lost world of youth in which there are no
responsibilities or duties; a private, shadowy, mysterious world, inaccessible to all
outsiders. The strength of Babbitt's regressive impulses is evident in the investment he
places in his friendship with Paul Riesling (a childhood friend whom he still addresses
by a childish term of endearment, "Paulibus"), and it is naturally to the unhappily-
marr ied Paul that he turns to take refuge from the adult world.

Early on in the novel, Babbitt confides his intention to his wife to "take a long
motor trip," but she misunderstands him, assuming that she will accompany him, and
he goes to bed "heavy with a lonely feeling which perplexed and frightened him"
(Lewis 1991: 79). The idea of escaping - of realising, at least temporarily, the "fairy
child" dream of flight - persists, however, and eventually Babbitt conspires with Paul
(not the "fairy child," but the next best thing - a living reminder of Babbitt's childhood)
to spend a few days together in Maine, arranging for their wives to join them later. When
Babbitt tries to explain the plan to his wife, she is bewildered and hurt, asking
plaintively "Do I bother you when we go on vacations? Don't I add anything to your
He broke. Suddenly, dreadfully, he was hysterical, he was a yelping baby. "Yes, yes, yes! Hell, yes! But can't you understand I'm shot to pieces? I'm all in! I got to take care of myself! I tell you, I got to - I'm sick of everything and everybody! I got to - " ...

Why, of course! You shall run off by yourself! Why don't you get Paul to go along, and you boys just fish and have a good time?"

(Lewis 1991: 109)

After this exchange (in which Babbitt speaks with the incoherent vehemence of childish self-pity and his wife takes on the role of mother, consoling her distraught husband/son), Babbitt does not, however, feel the expected elation and relief: what he feels is fear.

For many minutes, for many hours, for a bleak eternity, he lay awake, shivering, reduced to primitive terror, comprehending that he had won freedom, and wondering what he could do with anything so unknown and so embarrassing as freedom.

(Lewis 1991: 109)

Babbitt feels frustrated, hedged in, enervated and emasculated by his life in Zenith, but when faced with the immediate prospect of leaving it behind he panics. His burdens (his job, his family, his social position) are also his props. What Babbitt is terrified of is himself - of finding that, shorn of his roles as businessman, father, husband - he has no self (in allegorical terms, Babbitt's desire for and fear of freedom echoes the experience of America itself, yearning to break free from the ties imposed by the Old World, but fearing that the severing of those ties will leave it floundering without any sense of identity, that it will not know what to do with its freedom).

Babbitt does enjoy temporary relief in Maine, but afterwards returns to his usual routine. Paul, however, becomes increasingly depressed and eventually shoots his wife Zilla, and is imprisoned. Deprived of the solace of his childhood companion, Babbitt undergoes a crisis. He begins an affair with a client, Tanis Judique, and refuses to condemn the activities of his old college-friend-turned-union-activist, Seneca Doane,
or to join the Good Citizens League (an anti-socialist organisation whose campaign against the Open Shop "was secretly a struggle against all union labor" [Lewis 1991: 312]). The "veiled rebellions" with which Babbitt flattered his ego earlier in the novel become overt gestures of dissent, and Babbitt is gradually ostracised by the Zenith community of Good Fellows (Lewis 1991: 79).

Babbitt's new-found boldness is skin-deep, however. He cannot truly forsake his old values, because he has internalised them:

he could never run away from Zenith and family and office, because in his own brain he bore the office and the family and every street and disquiet and illusion of Zenith.

(Lewis 1991: 242)

The "illusion" of Zenith is what sustains its inhabitants: the myth that Babbitt, in his guise as realtor, peddles - that it "is the finest example of American life and prosperity to be found anywhere" (Lewis 1991: 149) - but that is belied by his own private myth, in which he flees with the "fairy child" from all that it represents. In real life Babbitt remains, disillusioned. Alienated from his erstwhile friends ("He heard them whispering ... and he walked the streets alone, afraid of men's cynical eyes and the incessant hiss of whispering") and from his wife ("he stared bleakly at this plump and fussy woman with the broad bare arms, and wondered how she had ever come here"), Babbitt has tested the waters of freedom and been scalded (Lewis 1991: 303).

The League also sponsor an Americanization Movement, which runs evening classes in English and history and economics, and daily articles in the newspapers, so that newly arrived foreigners might learn that the true-blue American way of settling labor-troubles was for workmen to trust and love their employers.

(Lewis 1991: 312)
When his wife is taken ill with a fortuitous attack of acute appendicitis, Babbitt jumps at the opportunity of reconciliation. He sees his wife now not as an estranged entity, but as an inseparable part of his own identity, "not merely A Woman, to be contrasted with other women, but his own self" (Lewis 1991: 305). In the ambulance, on the way to the hospital, Babbitt burns his hand on the radiator.

So, as they drove up to St. Mary's Hospital, with the nurses already laying out the instruments for an operation to save her life, it was she who consoled him and kissed the place to make it well, and though he tried to be gruff and mature, he yielded to her and was glad to be babied.

(Lewis 1991: 308)

Babbitt has had enough of trying to be grown-up, enough of trying to be independent, and now he gratefully returns to the "life of barren heartiness" that he had briefly vowed to reject (Lewis 1991: 274). He returns to his family, his work, and to the Zenith community, chastened, and reassured of "the supreme charm of the Good Fellows" (Lewis 1991: 310). He joins the Good Citizens League and displays the required reactionary zeal.

Within two weeks no one ... was more violent regarding the wickedness of Seneca Doane, the crimes of labor unions, the perils of immigration, and the delights of golf, morality and bank accounts than was George F. Babbitt.

(Lewis 1991: 310-11)

Babbitt clings once more to the old illusions, reclaims his place in the community and relinquishes his struggle for self-fulfilment and self-definition. He has been forced to submit to the edict of middle-class American society that requires its members to conform.

American democracy did not imply any equality of wealth, but did demand a wholesome sameness of thought, dress, painting, morals and vocabulary.

(Lewis 1991: 311)
Earlier on in the novel, before his rebellion, Babbitt delivers the Annual Address at the dinner of the Zenith Real Estate Board, in which, nominating himself as "a representative business man", he extolls the virtues of the "Solid American Citizen", the "Regular Guy" and the "Standardized American Citizen" (Lewis 1991: 150-151). Babbitt welcomes what he sees as the start of a new era of conformity, "a new type of civilisation", of which the foundation-stone will be the "sane standardization" of every aspect of American life (Lewis 1991: 152). For Babbitt the businessman, this vision is Utopian; it represents the universal consensus that is every marketing man's dream. What Babbitt fails to appreciate, however, is that he is not just a representative businessman, selling to this mythical Citizen, but also a representative consumer, being sold the dream of belonging, the American Dream. It is this impulse to conform, to belong, to be American, which ultimately dictates Babbitt's behaviour. He goes to baseball matches not out of any love for the game, but because "the game was a custom of his clan" and so it is with his other opinions and tastes (Lewis 1991: 128).

just as the priests of the Presbyterian Church determined his every religious belief and the senators who controlled the Republican Party decided in little smoky rooms in Washington what he should think about disarmament, tariff and Germany, so did the large national advertisers fix the surface of his life, fix what he believed to be his individuality.

(Lewis 1991: 80-81)

This bleak vision of a society controlled by massive impersonal institutions is remarkably modern and links Babbitt with a much later development of the business novel tradition - what we might call the corporate-business novel.

In his book entitled The Corporation and the Emergent American Society, W. Lloyd Warner quotes from Peter Drucker's The Concept of a Corporation to emphasise the centrality of the corporation in modern America:
"What we look for in analyzing American society ... is the institution which sets the standard for the way of life and the mode of living of our citizens which leads, molds, and directs; which determines our perspective on our own society; around which crystallize our social problems and to which we look for their solution. What is essential in society is ... the symbol through which facts are organized in a social pattern; not, in other words, the average but the representative. And this, in our society today, is the large corporation."

(Warner 1962: 25)

Forty years after Lewis's portrait of a man who abdicates selfhood in favour of a standard, externally-directed existence, who sacrifices individuality for the sake of being acceptably American, the forces of conformity have become enshrined as the "essential" symbols of American society. According to Warner, the large corporation is not merely hugely influential, it is "representative". This phenomenon begins to be treated in novels from the mid-fifties onwards, but perhaps the most powerful fictional explorations of the world of corporate business appear in the early seventies.

Don DeLillo's first novel, *Americana*, published in 1971,\(^{35}\) is set partially in this corporate world and proposes an explanation of the American self that vividly recalls Lewis's.

"In this country there is a universal third person, the man we all want to be. Advertising has discovered this man. It uses him to express the possibilities open to the consumer. To consume in America is not to buy; it is to dream. Advertising is the suggestion that the dream of entering the third person singular might possibly be fulfilled."

(DeLillo 1990: 270)

Like Lewis, DeLillo identifies advertising as the chief determinant of the American self. DeLillo's diagnosis of America's malaise is, however, more pessimistic than Lewis's (one of the remarkable features of *Babbitt* is that, although it is essentially a tale of defeat and frustration, it is not a depressing novel) and seems, in important

\(^{35}\) Though all my quotations are taken from a revised version published in 1990.
ways, to anticipate Heller's in *Something Happened* (which appears three years later, in 1974).

Whereas Babbitt remains to some extent a Dickensian caricature (sublimely unselfconscious, convinced of his innate goodness), for whom the third-person narrator feels a mixture of pity, affection and contempt, David Bell and Bob Slocum (the first-person narrators of *Americana* and *Something Happened*, respectively) are intensely self-conscious, acutely aware of how unsympathetic they are. Bell is an executive for a large, powerful (unnamed) television network. He is bored with his work (he spends his days in the office playing "basketball," aiming pieces of crumpled paper at the wastebasket) and indulges, mechanically, in joyless affairs ("that first affair of mine was a dullard's dream; it differed from most only because I was not a commuter and did not have to adapt my orgasms to the discipline of a train schedule" [DeLillo 1990: 37]). Slocum is an executive for a large, powerful (unnamed) company, who sell an unidentified product. He is bored with his work (he spends his days in the office devising "happiness charts" which rank the company's employees according to their state of mind), and indulges, mechanically, in joyless affairs ("This fiscal period, I am flirting with Jane" [Heller 1974: 23]).

Bell's network runs an "unofficial program of relentless cordiality" and has a set of unwritten codes that extend to such minutiae as the colour of its employees' ties (DeLillo 1990: 67).

At work I dressed in the establishment manner, which, granted, was not without a touch of color, the establishment having learned that every color is essentially gray as long as everyone is wearing it. So I did not hesitate to show up in an orange tie, but never more orange than the orange others wore. (DeLillo 1990: 36)

Slocum's company similarly insists on a "pose of comfortable intimacy" between high-level employees, who are all "on a congenial, first-name basis" with each other
(Heller 1974: 22) and when his colleague, Andy Kagle, asks Slocum's advice on how to shore up his position within the company, Slocum's response indicates the paramount importance of sartorial conformity:

"Play more golf. Talk to Red Parker and buy a blue blazer. Buy better suits. Wear a jacket in the office and keep your necktie up tight around your neck where it belongs."36

(Heller 1974: 55)

Above all, however, both companies are founded on a hierarchy of fear. The second section of Heller's novel begins:

In the office in which I work there are five people of whom I am afraid. Each of these five people is afraid of four people (excluding overlaps), for a total of twenty, and each of these twenty people is afraid of six people, making a total of one hundred and twenty people who are feared by at least one person. Each of these one hundred and twenty people is afraid of the other one hundred and nineteen, and all of these one hundred and forty-five people are afraid of the twelve men at the top who helped found the company and now own and direct it. (Heller 1974: 13)

Delillo's novel begins with Bell arriving at a party hosted by one of his colleagues and quickly sizing up the situation: "There were thirty-one people in the room. Roughly three out of four were hostile" (DeLillo 1990: 4). The tendency of both men to quantify and categorise emotions with clinical detachment is clearly the result of their work environments.

Bell believes that "everybody's bucking for my job" and constantly hears or himself instigates rumours of dismissal amongst his peers ("I just heard Phelps got the axe"; "Phelps Lawrence just got bounced ... There's a rumor that Joyner's next"; "I

36 The premium placed on conformity by the company is illustrated symbolically by the fact that all Slocum's colleagues (with the exception of Kagle and Arthur Baron) have colour surnames: Green, Brown, Black and White.
heard Reeves Chubb got canned"; "I understand Mars Tyler got the sack"). Slocum has to listen repeatedly to the fears of both Green (his boss) and Kagle (the head of a rival department, for whom he also does some work) that they are about to be fired (DeLillo 1990: 9, 19, 23, 26, 28). This atmosphere of competitive paranoia instils in both men a belief that other people's bad news is good news: Slocum "rejoice[s] momentarily in the misfortunes of friends" (Heller 1974: 133) and Bell suggests that "Men like to be told of another man's defeat, failure, collapse, perdition: it makes them stronger" (DeLillo 1990: 332).

Fear extends to subordinates, equals and superiors. Bell values his secretary, Binky, because she "lied on my behalf and defended me on all counts against charges made by the secretaries of men who feared and hated me" and keeps him informed of the ages of all the company's new recruits ("What I feared most were younger men who might advance to positions higher than mine" [DeLillo 1990: 14, 7]). Binky is having an affair with Bell's immediate superior, Weede Denney, and when Weede returns, after their lunchtime trysts,

he always walked by my office very quickly, then tried to avoid me for the rest of the day ... he was afraid of me on those Thursdays. But on Friday morning he would come looking for me, breathing smoke and vengeance, as if I were the engineer of his guilt.

(DeLillo 1990: 25)

Weede himself is "a master of the office arts", an expert at exploiting "the etiquette of office combat" (DeLillo 1990: 15, 18), but his relationship with Bell is one of mutual fear, as is Slocum's with Green, who is "a clever tactician with long experience at office politics" ("In the normal course of a business day, I fear Green and

37 The sheer range of synonyms for dismissal here illustrates the prominence of the fear of losing one's job in the corporate world.
Green fears me" [Heller 1974: 39, 16]). The climate of fear and mutual suspicion is pervasive in both novels and precipitates a sort of self-deconstructing discourse from which meaning is absent.

Once out of the mailroom, I began to learn more about fear. As soon as fear begins to ascend, anatomically, from the pit of the stomach to the throat and brain, from fear of violence to the more nameless kind, you come to believe you are part of a horrible experiment. I learned to distrust those superiors who encouraged independent thinking. When you gave it them, they only returned it in the form of terror, for they knew that ideas, only that, could hasten their obsolescence . . . I learned that most of the secretaries were more intelligent than most of the executives and that the executive secretaries were more to be feared than anyone. I learned . . . how important it was to lie even when there was no need to lie. Words and meanings were at odds. Words did not say what was being said nor even its reverse.

(DeLillo 1990: 36)

As it is in *Babbitt*, fear here is used above all as a means of maintaining conformity and stifling individuality; just as Babbitt's old friends ostracise him because of the threat his new-found liberalism poses to their cosy consensual world (Babbitt imagines them saying "he's dangerous, that's what he is, and he's got to be shown up"), so the executives at Bell's company quell new ideas and dissenting voices in order to safeguard their own positions (Lewis 1991: 301)

Bell's description of the process by which fear and distrust lead to the destabilisation of language itself is enacted in much of Slocum's narrative. In his discussion of salesmen, for example, he tells us, that, among the company employees they are "most afraid of most people" (Heller 1974: 25). They are, he tells us, "a vigorous, fun-loving bunch when they are not suffering abdominal cramps or brooding miserably about the future" and "they are cheerful, confident, and gregarious when they are not irritable, anxious, and depressed" (Heller 1974: 26, 27). This type of self-negating statement also occurs quite frequently in the form of an initial positive declaration being followed by a negative parenthetical one (rather like the two
balancing halves of an antithesis): "I really like and admire Green in many respects (even though I also hate and resent him in many others)"); "Most of the men who do make it toward the top are persistent hard workers if they are nothing else (and they are frequently nothing else. Ha, Ha)" (Heller 1974: 31, 43). This is the type of thing that David Seed has in mind when he suggests that the extraordinary use of parentheses in the novel "almost add up to a second narrative voice, mocking and questioning the assertions of the first" (Seed 1989: 123). This is somewhat misleading however, for, as often as not, the parenthetical passages are reflective and poignantly confessional, rather than flippant or ironic, and serve not to undermine the unbracketed voice, but to reinforce it; to add a further, more intimate, layer of observation.

Above all, the ubiquity of the parenthesis emphasises the provisionality of Slocum's personality, the perpetual revision and refinement, digression and regression, construction and reconstruction, that accompany his thought-processes.

38 Sometimes both halves of the statement are in parentheses:

(Nothing is suppressed in our family.)
(In our family, everything is suppressed.)

(Heller 1974: 258)

39 Often these are bleak observations, concerning the loneliness of Slocum and others. For example, this is Slocum on his affairs with younger women:

It is sometimes pleasant, sometimes sad; it is never pleasant for long without turning sad (and uncomfortable, at least for me. Often, they wish to become more devoted to me than I want them to be. I find close relationships suffocating). There is usually something drunken about it (that's my fault, I guess - I like to drink and to get them drinking too), something forlorn and pathological (perhaps in both of us). They like to talk a lot, and they like to listen, to be talked to seriously. (More than anything else, I think, they crave to be spoken to.)

(Heller 1974: 97)
Heller himself notes that "Slocum can ... look at himself, as if almost in a schizophrenic state" (Heller 1986b in Ruas 1986: 160), and indeed many of the parentheses are explanations of Slocum's self, or rather of the lack of it - and this is the key point. Slocum is not simply schizophrenic: rather, like David Bell, he has no sovereign self, only a series of competing consciousnesses, split selves. When Slocum recalls episodes from his past, he is convinced that the protagonist of these memories is somebody else, not me ... there must have been a second person who grew up alongside me (or inside me) and filled in for me on occasions ... And there was even a third person of whom I am aware only dimly ... And I am aware of still one more person whom I am not even aware of ...

(Heller 1974: 135)

Again, Slocum's self-alienation - the sense he has that what has happened, and is happening, to the man called Slocum ("I am not Bob Slocum just because my parents decided to call me that. If there is such a person, I don't know who he is") may have happened, or be happening, to a second, third or fourth person - has a precedent in

40 Heller perhaps had in mind the following passage:

I have these perfectly controlled conversations with Arthur Baron about Andy Kagle, and with Andy Kagle about Arthur Baron, and I find myself wondering, even while they are taking place, just what the fuck I am doing in them. (Is that really me there talking and listening?) I'll float away outside them a few yards to watch and eavesdrop and begin to feel I am looking down upon a pornographic puppet show of stuffed dolls in which someone I recognise who vaguely resembles me is one of the performers ...

(Heller 1974: 506)

In The Minimal Self, Christopher Lasch quotes Chester Burger, author of Executives Under Fire and Survival in the Executive Jungle, advising businessmen that

You have to stand back and look at yourself objectively as a participant ... I try to function as two people: the participant, and also the observer of the situation.

(Lasch 1985: 97)
David Bell's "dream of entering the third person singular", that turns out to be more of a nightmare (Heller 1974: 461).

So repetitive is the routine of Bell's office that

There were times when I thought all of us at the network existed only on videotape. Our words and actions seemed to have a disturbingly elapsed quality. We had said and done all these things before and they had been frozen for a time, rolled up in little laboratory trays to await broadcast and re-broadcast when the proper time-slots became available.

(DeLillo 1990: 23)

In a sense, Bell's feeling of *déjà vu* is prophetic. Unlike *Something Happened*, which is narrated in a continuous present tense, *Americana* is narrated retrospectively and represents an attempt, on Bell's part (now living on a remote island), to reconfigure his "unassembled past" (DeLillo 1990: 129). One of his methods for doing so, in a routine reminiscent of *Krapp's Last Tape*, is to replay old footage recorded during his years with the network (particularly footage that he shoots on a journey westwards across America, with which the second half of the novel is taken up). Bell sets off promising to film a documentary about life on a Navaho Indian reservation, but gradually, on his way there, a very different project emerges: one that involves "a reaching back for certain things ... an attempt to explain ... An attempt to explore parts of my consciousness" (DeLillo 1990: 263). As with Krapp's tapes, this footage addresses itself self-consciously to the problem of closing the gap between present and past selves.

"The year is 1999. You are looking at a newsreel of an earlier time. A man is standing in a room in America. It is you, David, more or less. What can the two of you say to each other? How can you empty out the intervening decades?"

(DeLillo 1990: 309)
The problem for Bell is not simply one of recovering this past self, however. As the phrase "more or less" suggests, the identity of that self is itself questionable, unstable. Bell's relationships with women are inevitably marred by his determination to withhold his essential self from them. To his first lover, David remained unrevealed. I refused to give her any sense of myself and I can only guess the reason, that I needed every ego-scrap, that I feared my own disappearance.

(DeLillo 1990: 41)

With his wife, Meredith, after she had confided the histories of her previous loves, David responds with "nothing but lies" (DeLillo 1990: 58). Initially, he suggests that this was simply an intoxicating intellectual game ("To construct one's own reality ... was an adventure even more thrilling than the linguistic free falls of the network" (DeLillo 1990: 58). Soon, however, it emerges that there is a more fundamental cause for this apparent perversity: David cannot speak truly - with authority - about his experiences because, like episodes from Slocum's past, those experiences do not seem to have happened to him at all:

I put something of myself into those stories and hoped, in vain as it turned out, to arrive at a definition, one disguised of course by the surrounding absurdity - a definition of myself without the usual anguish such readings entail ... The only problem I had was that my whole life was a lesson in the effect of echoes, that I was living in the third person. This would have been hard to explain.

(DeLillo 1990: 58)

Bell finds it hard to explain himself to others because he is an other to himself. His flight from the network (and from civilisation) is a symbolic flight from this ontological abyss - the flight that Babbitt dreams of but never manages - and his
westward journey across America is an attempt at self-definition - at discovering the frontiers of his self - that self-consciously mirrors American history.41

Then I took off on ... the great seeking leap into the depths of America, wilderness dream of all our poets and scoutmasters, westward to our manifest destiny, to sovereign red timber and painted sands, to the gold-transfigured hills, westward to match the shadows of my image and my self.

(DeLillo 1990: 341)

As the parodic tone of this passage suggests, Bell's journey of self-discovery is not successful, however, and he ends up retreating from American reality altogether, living in solitude and attempting, through the writing of the novel we are reading, to

41 This analogy is also implicit throughout the novel. When Bell first conceives his plan, he rings up his girlfriend Sullivan, who "liked me because I was ... so squarely in the American tradition" (Delillo 1990: 107).

"Utah," I said.
"Hello, David."
"Montana, Wyoming, Nevada, Arizona ... "
"Steamboat Springs, the Sawtooth Mountains, Big Timber, Aztec, Durango, Spanish Fork, Monument Valley."
"I hear America singing," she said, but not as if she meant it.

(Delillo 1990: 27)

Later, on the road, neither is certain which State they are in (reflecting both Bell's personal disorientation and the anonymous vastness of the country).

"Where are we anyway?" she said.
"It could be Indiana. But it could be Illinois or Kentucky. I'm not sure."
"I guess it doesn't matter. I don't know why I ask, but what's west of here?"
"Iowa, I think. Although maybe Iowa is further north. I'm trying to remember what's below Iowa."
"Never mind. It doesn't matter. I don't know why I asked."

(Delillo 1990: 209)

His film is both an attempt to explain himself and to recreate the discovery of America, "to invent the primitive", "to make of something wild a squeamish thesis on the essence of the nation's soul" (Delillo 1990: 238, 349).
salvage what remains of his identity. Ultimately, he concedes, this too has been a failure.

I am falling silently through myself ... and as I prepare the final pages I feel I am drifting downward into coma, a sleep of no special terror and yet quite narrow and bottomless. Little of myself seems to be left.

(DeLillo 1990: 345)

Bell's image of the self as a crumbling edifice, each scrap of which must be hoarded to delay its imminent disappearance, but from which pieces keep breaking off and falling away, is echoed in *Something Happened*.

Mountainous segments of my history appear to be missing. There are yawning gulfs into which large chunks of me may have fallen.

(Heller 1974: 505)

Where are those scattered, ripped pieces of that fragmented little boy ... who turned out to be me? ... What ever happened to all those truly important parts of my past that no longer exist in my memory ... It is too late to gather me all up and put me together again. My life, therefore, is not entirely credible.

(Heller 1974: 134)

Whereas Bell tries to bolster his selfhood by replaying film, Slocum seeks to endow his life with credibility - to explain himself - by mentally rehearsing scenes from his past. Both succeed only in redoubling their self-alienation. Slocum wishes to reconstruct his personal history, to reassemble the jigsaw of his self, but his memories, like Bell's old footage, are either lost or do not seem to be connected to him anymore: "Much of what I remember about me does not seem to be mine" (Heller 1974: 505).

Like Bell's predicament, Slocum's is presented as symptomatic of American society at large.
Who am I? ... I am a broken waterlogged branch floating with my own crowd\(^{42}\) in this one nation of ours, indivisible (unfortunately), under God, with liberty and justice for all who are speedy enough to seize them first and hog them away from the rest. Some melting pot. If all of us in this vast, fabulous country of ours could come together and take time to exchange a few words with our neighbors and fellow countrymen, those words would be Bastard! Wop! Nigger! Whitey! Kike! Spic!

(Heller 1974: 305)

Like Heller himself (who once noted that "the big myth about this country ... [is] the melting pot. It isn't. They never melted"), Slocum dismisses the American myth of racial harmony, but for Slocum, the macrocosmic delusion of a common American identity corresponds to the microcosmic delusion of selfhood (Heller 1962b: in Kiley & McDonald 1973: 284).\(^{43}\) Just as Slocum cannot develop a cohesive identity, cannot draw together all the different strands of himself, cannot grow up, so America itself is seen as immature (note that Slocum chooses childish name-calling as the essential expression of the mutual fear of Americans), incapable of uniting its disparate elements.

Elsewhere, too, Slocum's vision of America tends to be either apocalyptic ("More and more things seem to be slipping into a state of dissolution") or cynical ("America the Beautiful' isn't ... I hear America singing fuck off" [Heller 1974: 224, 483-4]). Like Smitty, Slocum is a paranoid fantasist who feels himself to be the victim of hostile American forces.

\(^{42}\) This may well be an allusion to David Riesman's celebrated study of the American society of which Slocum is a part, *The Lonely Crowd*.

\(^{43}\) Bellow expresses his views on the American myth of racial integration in almost identical terms: "it wasn't a melting pot. It didn't melt" (Bellow 1994: 294).
I've got anxiety; I suppress hysteria. I've got politics on my mind, summer race riots, drugs, violence, and teen-age sex. There are perverts and deviates everywhere who might corrupt or strangle any one of my children. I've got crime in my streets. I've got old age to face. My boy, though only nine, is already worried because he does not know what he wants to be when he grows up. My daughter tells lies. I've got the decline of American civilization and the guilt and ineptitude of the whole government of the United States to carry around on these poor shoulders of mine.

(Heller 1974: 67)

For Slocum there is no distinction between his own domestic worries and national crises. His son's premature career-agonising, his daughter's dishonesty, his own imminent old age - these sources of anxiety merge with, and are representative of, what Slocum sees as "the decline of American civilization". Like America itself, Slocum is caught between the desire to construct a distinctive, separate identity and the fear that to do so would be to isolate himself from his past - a fear that urges conformity as a way of reassuring himself that he belongs. He has an "enslaving instinct to be like just about anyone I happen to find myself with", which manifests itself in the "wretched habit ... of acquiring the characteristics of other people" (Heller 1974: 72).

I often wonder what my own true nature is. Do I have one? I always dress well. But no matter what I put on, I always have the disquieting sensation that I am copying somebody; I can always remind myself of somebody else I know who dresses much that same way.

(Heller 1974: 73)

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44 Ironically, it is of course Slocum himself, rather than the "perverts and deviates" whom he fears, who strangles one of his children.

45 Essentially, this is a milder form of the condition endured by Leonard Zelig in Woody Allen's film and, like Zelig, Slocum's instinct is born of the most fundamental fear - the fear of becoming an autonomous individual, of developing a self.
Whereas Bell identifies with no one, not even himself, Slocum identifies with everyone but himself. He feels others' pain as though it were his own, or would if he let himself.

it is painful for me to witness the deterioration of any human being who has ever been dear (or even near) to me, even of chance acquaintances, or total strangers. ( ... I will not let myself cope with such human distress; I refuse to accept such reality; I dump it all right down into my unconscious and sit on it as hard as I can. Let it all come out in bad dreams if it has to. I forget them anyway as soon as I wake up.)

(Heller 1974: 103-4)

These scenes of human distress do indeed occur in Slocum's bad dreams, but he does not forget them after waking. In particular, he dreams of some dreadful accident befalling his son. One such dream involves the maid calling Slocum at his office:

"Mr. -----------, your boy is lying on the floor and hasn't breathed for fifteen seconds."
That was precisely the way the words were floated to me in my dream or beclouded waking moments:
"Mr. -----------, your boy is lying on the floor and hasn't breathed for fifteen seconds."
(No name. A gap, a portentous omission, an empty underlining - I don't know how.)

(Heller 1974: 343)

Slocum's "boy" (this is his only designation throughout the novel; the only member of Slocum's family, apart from himself, to be named, is his "idiot" child Derek) is the one character in the book whom Slocum truly loves. His recurrent fears for his welfare (in his waking consciousness, as well as his dreams, he is haunted by the conviction that "Something bad is going to happen to him") are, on one level, the natural result of this love that fears the loss of its object. Indeed, when Slocum suffocates the child (he discovers him in acute distress, having been hit by a car and...
enfolds him in an asphyxiating embrace) it seems to be the unwitting action of a loving
father intent on comforting his child:

He looksbeggingly at me for help. His screams are piercing. I can't bear to see
him suffering such agony and fright. I have to do something. I hug his face
deeper into the crook of my shoulder. I hug him tightly with both my arms. I
squeeze.

(Heller 1974: 562)

There is, however, another explanation for Slocum's actions, one that Slocum
himself points us towards when he observes that "Poor Oedipus has been much
maligned. He didn't want to kill his father. His father wanted to kill him" (Heller
1974: 336) and again in the passage that directly precedes the fatal incident above.

When I am sixty-five I will have nothing more to look forward to than reaching
seventy-five, or dying before then. And when I am seventy-five, I will have
nothing more to look forward to than dying at eighty-five, or geriatric care in a
nursing home ... I don't want to live longer than eighty-five, and I don't want to
die sooner than a hundred and eighty-six.
Oh my father - why have you done this to me?
I want him back.
I want my little boy back too.
I don't want to lose him.
I do.

(Heller 1974: 561)

Why should Slocum want to kill his boy whom he loves so much? Partly,
perhaps, because he loves him so much, because he "identif[ies] with him too closely"
and that identification brings with it the intimate knowledge of human distress that
Slocum wishes to evade at all costs (Heller 1974: 338). Also, however, to spare father
and son the trials of adulthood, to preserve forever his childhood state by ensuring that
he does not live beyond it. For like Babbitt, Slocum dreams of perpetual childhood -
of recovering his childish self and rejecting the adult world and, like Babbitt, he sees
his son as the means by which he can achieve this vicariously.
At the end of *Babbitt*, Babbitt's son, Ted, reveals that he has secretly married their neighbour's daughter, Eunice Littlefield, and intends to leave college to work in a factory, with a view to "get[ing] into mechanics" (Lewis 1991: 319). Although Babbitt has hitherto insisted that Ted finish his university education and obtain a degree, he now unexpectedly offers his support.

"I've never done a single thing I've wanted to in my whole life! I don't know's I've accomplished anything except just get along ... Well, maybe you'll carry things on further. I don't know. But I do get a kind of sneaking pleasure out of the fact that you knew what you wanted to do and did it ... Take your factory job, if you want to. Don't be scared of the family. No, nor all of Zenith. Nor of yourself, the way I've been. Go ahead, old man! The world is yours!"

*(Lewis 1991: 319)*

Babbitt encourages his son's impulsiveness because it incarnates his own "fairy child" dream - Ted will flee the pressures of Zenith and the family with a young female companion. Above all, he hopes that Ted will conquer the fear that has inhibited his father. This is not simply the goodwill of a father towards his son, however. Babbitt concedes that he gets "a sneaking pleasure" - that is furtive, illicit, childish delight - from witnessing his son's rebellion and this, together with the slang term of endearment with which he addresses Ted ("old man"), suggests that Babbitt is not so much rejoicing paternally in his son's independent spirit as conspiring with him - two children together - in the game of playing at being adults. What appeals to Babbitt most of all about his son is actually his very childishness ("I think I'd get to be a good inventor", is Ted's career-plan) and his naïve imitation of adulthood (Lewis 1991: 319). He recalls with fond pride the occasion, earlier in the novel, when Ted had referred to the two of them as "the Babbitt men" and, taking this as his cue, endorses his son's decision. The novel (which, throughout, portrays Babbitt and his peers as spoilt children who boost each others' egos through their participation in their clubs' activities, which constitute adult versions of their childish games) ends with an ironic echo of this phrase:
Arms about each other's shoulders, the Babbitt men marched into the living-room and faced the swooping family.

(Lewis 1991: 319)

Slocum's relationship with his son, although very different in most respects from Babbitt's with Ted (Ted is much older than Slocum's son, and Slocum is much more involved with his son than Babbitt with his), has this crucial similarity: Slocum does not want his son to grow up so much as he wants to regress with him.

I know at last what I want to be when I grow up. 
When I grow up I want to be a little boy.

(Heller 1974: 340)

Slocum often dreams of his mother (whose last words to him were "You're no good"), waking in the morning to feel "like a forsaken child" (Heller 1974: 545, 398).
His regressive fantasies are characteristically couched, as in the paradox above, in the form of childish jokes:

(It wasn't so bad living in my old man's scrotum, as far as I can recall. It was warm and humid, and there was lots of companionship. I had a ball.)

(Heller 1974: 498)

Like Babbitt, Slocum resents being an adult, yearns for the comfort of being a child, wants to be pitied and babied by his own family; unlike Babbitt, he knows it.

(... I want to be nursed and coddled. I don't get the love and sympathy from my family that I used to get as a child from my mother and certain women teachers. God dammit - I want to be treated like a baby sometimes by my wife and kids ... I'm not one of these parents that expect to be taken care of by their children in their old age: I want my children to take care of me now.)

(Heller 1974: 457-8)
Slocum's emotional development has been arrested, but his life has carried on regardless, so that he feels a tremendous nostalgia for his childhood, a nostalgia that moves beyond mere sentiment into the realms of grief. Slocum is both a man mourning the death of his childhood self and a child searching for an adult self: the man and the child are one and the same, and yet cannot be reconciled.

(... I am still a little boy. I am a deserted little boy I know who will never grow older and never change, who goes away and then comes back. ... He makes me sad whenever I remember him. He is still alive, yet out of my control. This is as much as he ever became. He never goes far and always comes back. I can't help him. Between us now there is a cavernous void. He is always nearby.)

(Heller 1974: 158)

The vacillation between the use of the first-person and third-person, and between the present ("I am ..."), past ("as much as he ever became") and future ("will never grow older") tenses, to describe the identity and temporal status of the "little boy" who is and is not Slocum, illustrate Slocum's confusion. The paradox of the simultaneous proximity ("He is always nearby") and distance ("Between us now there is a cavernous void") between the boy and Slocum is what causes him/them most anguish - the distance cannot be closed (they cannot coincide) but nor can it be widened (they cannot be separated). How to resolve this paralysis?

Slocum's solution is to kill his childish self, which is to say kill his child, for the internal "little boy" and the external "boy" are effectively one and the same (the chapter focusing on the son is entitled "My little boy is having difficulties"). His anxieties are Slocum's; his suffering is Slocum's (when his wife calls Slocum to the boy's bedside to show him "a fiery red blotch on the side of the head of his penis," he "doubled over with a keen, slicing pain in my own penis" [Heller 1974: 339]). At one point he even seems to detect Slocum's own existential crisis and begins "to suspect that I was no longer really me" (Heller 1974: 292). Like the "little boy" that was (and is) Slocum, Slocum cannot bear the intensity of his intimacy, but can bear even less the threat of
withdrawal. This withdrawal is the inevitable consequence of growing up, however, and it seems that this is what is happening, just before the car accident. The penultimate chapter, in which the accident occurs, is entitled "My boy has stopped talking to me" and begins like this:

My boy has stopped talking to me, and I don't think I can stand it ... Why should he want to stop talking to me? I want to be his best friend.

(Heller 1974: 549)

Like Babbitt, Slocum does not want to be a father to his son, he wants to be his buddy, his confidant, his "best friend". His boy is his way of remaining young, of not having to grow up, and when he ceases to fulfil this function, Slocum has to "do something" (Heller 1974: 553). Earlier in the novel, Slocum fantasises about killing Derek - "I smother [him] with a huge hand over his mouth ... (It is not to put him out of his misery that I do it; it is to put me out of mine)" - but in the end it is his other son whom he smothers in order to put himself out of his misery (Heller 1974: 367). Whereas Babbitt ends by displaying unwonted humanity (when he offers his son his support, Ted exclaims "Gosh, dad, are you really going to be human?"), Slocum stifles the last vestiges of his humanity with the last breath of his son (Lewis 1991: 319). In this zombie-like state Slocum's career looks set to thrive - and this, ultimately, is Heller's most damning judgment of the values of the corporate-business world (and of the American society which it mirrors). The novel ends with Slocum's promotion (he is given Andy Kagle's job) and with the chilling final sentence: "Everyone seems pleased with the way I've taken command" (Heller 1974: 569).

46 Throughout the novel it is made clear that the segregation between society and the business world is superficial - that American family life is governed by the same principles - and by the same hierarchies of fear - as American office politics.
Like the ending of *Madame Bovary*, which inform us of Homais' thriving practice and concludes with the news that "He has just been awarded the Legion of Honour", this is a swingeing indictment of the society depicted in the novel (Flaubert 1950: 361). The urban America of Heller's novel, like the rural France of Flaubert's, is characterised by its intolerance of difference, by its imperative to conform. Whereas Emma defies this imperative and is destroyed, Slocum submits and is rewarded.

Above all, however, Slocum's America, the America symbolised by the nameless, purposeless (all it appears to sell is selling itself) corporation which employs him, is, like the worlds of *Babbitt* and *Americana*, a place of inchoate fear.

The one-armed ex-navy man who gives David Bell a lift on the final leg of his journey has made fear his business.

It's an intricate thing, fear. I've been making a study of it during my travels. There's a whole literature of fear in the libraries of the world, just waiting to be read.

(DeLillo 1990: 376)

Heller's novel is part of this "literature of fear", perhaps pre-eminently the novel in which business culture, with its attendant fears - of freedom, of attaining selfhood, of growing up - is seen as a microcosm of American culture.

**Collaborative Myths of Self-Creation: Saul Bellow and the American Artist As Split Self**

When Babbitt delivers the annual address at the Zenith Real Estate Board, he pays tribute to the American artist:
"In other countries, art and literature are left to a lot of shabby bums living in attics and feeding on booze and spaghetti, but in America the successful writer or picture-painter is indistinguishable from any other decent business man ... "

(Lewis 1991: 150)

This is of course a typical example of the philistinism for which the character of Babbitt has become renowned, but - the absurdity of his image of foreign artists as "bums ... feeding on ... spaghetti" notwithstanding - the idea that art in America is a business like any other is a recurring one. In Bellow's *Humboldt's Gift*, the narrator/hero, Charlie Citrine, engaged in conversation with his Babbitt-like brother, Ulick, argues that America has tried to subvert art by commercialising it:

"To make capitalists out of artists was a humorous idea of some depth. America decided to test the pretensions of the esthetic by applying the dollar measure."

(Bellow 1975a: 388)

Citrine's observation is typically Bellovian in its sentiments and in its personification of America. Bellow once claimed that "There's enough European in me to be able to look at America as a foreigner", but his preoccupation with the nature of America and Americans is possibly the most American feature of his writing (Bellow 1977 in Trachtenberg 1979: 67). In an autobiographical piece entitled "Starting Out in Chicago", Bellow emphasises the importance of American life to his work.

The important thing for me was that American society and S. Bellow came face to face. I had to learn that by cutting myself off from American life in order to perform an alien task, I risked cutting myself off from everything that could nourish me.

(Bellow 1974: 75)

Like Kenneth Trachtenberg, the narrator of *More Die of Heartbreak*, who is told by his father that he "was too ambitious and wanted to put my ill-hidden hubris to the ultimate test by taking on America itself" (Bellow 1987a: 301), Bellow persists in
grappling with America as a subject, as well as a setting, for his novels. Throughout his career America is figured as a living entity, a protagonist - the protagonist - against whom characters have to measure themselves and yet, as the narrator of "Cousins" points out:

Being an American always had been something of an abstract project. You came as an immigrant. You were offered a reasonable proposition and you said yes to it. You were found.  

(Bellow 1984: 282)

Found, but also lost - for the terms of the proposition that is put to each American immigrant demand the renouncing of all previous ties in return for acceptance as an American. Whether this sacrifice is worth making is a question that Bellow often examines in a Jewish context - as we have seen in The Bellarosa Connection, whose narrator wonders whether American materialism will do what European persecution could not:

The Jews could survive everything that Europe threw at them ... But now comes the next test - America. Can they hold their ground, or will the U.S.A. prove too much for them?  

(Bellow 1989b: 65)

Equally important in Bellow's work, however, is the "test" America poses to the artist - "the dollar measure". Bellow has always been a vociferous critic of the materialism and vulgarity of American society, and of its inhospitality to the artist.47

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47 Bellow's work - both the fiction and non-fiction - is filled with throwaway observations on American decadence and dissipation: "what a responsibility we bear, in this fat country of ours! Think what America could mean to the world. Then see what it is" (Bellow 1965a: 28); "bourgeois America ... A proud, lazy civilization that worships its own boorishness" (Bellow 1965a: 133); "the American failure to preserve human scale" (Bellow 1969: 161); "America is a pleasure society" (Bellow 1982: 271); "Economy and America were just about identical" (Bellow 1984: 284); "here in the U.S., the status of the individual was weakening and probably in irreversible decline"
Whether complaining in grandiose Jamesian terms that "Almost nothing of a spiritual, ennobling character is brought into the internal life of a modern American by his social institutions" (Bellow 1962 in Malin 1969: 215), and that "In America we have no Maîtres, no literary world, no literary public" (Bellow 1994: 80), or lamenting, somewhat bathetically, that "There is no literary culture in the United States" (Bellow 1977 in Trachtenberg 1979: 60), that "America's aim was not .. to encourage painters, philosophers, and novelists" (Bellow 1994: 218) and that "It's not easy to be a writer in the United States" (Bellow 1963a: 59), Bellow places himself squarely in the self-castigating tradition of American letters. Yet he also criticises this tradition.

We have become the most pleonastic, bombastic people in the world and, furthermore, a nation of liars. I add to this that no people has ever had such a passion for self-criticism ... People seem to become more American in sharing the blame for offenses they cannot have committed ... nothing makes us happier than to talk about ourselves. Our own experience as a people has become a source of ecstasy. And here am I, doing it too.

(Bellow 1976: 77-78)

The realisation with which Bellow pulls himself up here (that he is himself displaying the very traits that he is decrying as American) reflects the ambivalence of his attitude towards America. While he bemoans the fact that "Americans seem unable to live without prescriptions" (Bellow 1977 in Trachtenberg 1979: 72) and "Americans must be the most sententious people in history", he begins to sound prescriptive and sententious himself.48 This is particularly true of Bellow's greatest bugbear - the

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48 Bellow makes a similar observation in an earlier essay when he notes that "the American writer ... has been brought up to take messages seriously. Americans are a sententious people and are taught at an early age to moralize" (Bellow 1963a: 58).
lamentable influence on American art of what he calls "the great noise of modern life" (Bellow 1976: 94), that is to say "the terrible excitement and distraction generated by the crises of modern life", "the sounds of the public sphere, the din of politics" (Bellow 1975b: 77). Again and again he returns to this theme: "He [the novelist] ... is deafened by the noise of life, by cries and claims and counterclaims" (Bellow 1957b in Hicks 1957: 5); "art has something to do with an arrest of attention in the midst of distraction" (Bellow 1966b: 66); "If I had to name the one force in America today that opposes the symbolic discipline of poetry ... I would say the Great Noise" (Bellow 1974: 77); "Wedding guests and ancient mariners [readers and writers, in Bellow's conceit] are deafened by the terrific blaring of the technological band" (Bellow 1975b: 21); "Public life in the United States is a mass of distractions" (Bellow 1993: ix); "Your contemporary wedding guest has been transported ... into a sphere of distraction where instead of hearing village musicians he is blasted by a great noise - the modern noise" (Bellow 1994: 154). Bellow's objections to the American media

49 This state of distraction is summarised in Mr. Sammler's Planet:

the charm, the ebullient glamour, the almost unbearable agitation that came from being able to describe oneself as a twentieth-century American was available to all. To everyone that had eyes to read the papers or watch the television, to everyone who shared the collective ecstasies of news, crisis, power.

(Bellow 1970: 73)

Sammler was born in the nineteenth-century, has only one eye, and is European first and American second. Nevertheless, as this passage implies, being American is more a state of mind than a State: as Bellow puts it elsewhere "To be American was neither a territorial nor a linguistic phenomenon, but a concept - a set of ideas really" (Bellow 1994: 144). These ideas have of course been disseminated far beyond the geographical boundaries of America. As Govinda Lal - an Indian scientist with whom Sammler forms a friendship - observes:

"in a sense the whole world is now U.S. Inescapable ... It's like a big crow that has snatched our future from the nest, and we, the rest, are like little finches in pursuit trying to peck at it."

(Bellow 1970: 205)
go further than those made by Roth in "Writing American Fiction"; for Bellow it is not simply a matter of facts putting fancy to flight but of the media desensitising its audience, trivialising what really matters, distracting us from "what is essential" (Bellow 1994: 155). Although many of his other novels (notably Augie March, Herzog, Mr. Sammler's Planet and The Dean's December) deal with the American scene, it is in Humboldt's Gift that we find Bellow's most sustained and explicit dramatisation of this conflict - between the vulgarity of Noise and the sublimity of Art.

The narrator, Charlie Citrine, is the author of a huge Broadway hit-play and of several works of political/historical analysis (including his "favorite" - the swiftly-remaindered "failure" Some Americans: The Sense of Being in the USA) who, prompted by the breakdown of his marriage and the costly ensuing divorce proceedings and by a slump in his literary fortunes, begins to reexamine his life and, in particular, his relationship with his old, dead friend, the poet Von Humboldt Fleischer (Bellow 1975a: 50).

Although he achieves early critical acclaim with his debut collection Harlequin Ballads, Humboldt never enjoys the commercial success of Citrine and becomes increasingly frustrated, degenerating into paranoia and madness and finally dying in poverty and obscurity. For Citrine, Humboldt's story is the story of "art versus America" (Bellow 1975a: 155) with Humboldt, in his last years of decline, self-

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50 Although Bellow echoed Roth's sentiments closely in an article published in 1962 (the following year) - "What we read daily and view on the TV has thrust imagined forms into the shadows" (Bellow 1994: 67) - he has more recently distanced himself from them.

we (we writers, I mean) must cope with a plethora of attractions and excitements - world crises, hot and cold wars, threats to survival, famines, unspeakable crimes. To conceive of these as "rivals" would be absurd - even monstrous. I say no more than that these crises produce states of mind and attitudes toward existence that writers must take into account.

(Bellow 1993: vii)
consciously adopting the role of the artist martyred at the stake of American commercialism:

instead of being a poet he was merely the figure of a poet. He was enacting "The Agony of the American Artist." And it was not Humboldt, it was the USA that was making its point: "Fellow Americans, listen. If you abandon materialism and the normal pursuits of life you wind up at Bellevue like this poor kook."

(Bellow 1975a: 156)

In one of the two film "treatments" that constitute the gift of the novel's title - Humboldt's material legacy to Citrine - Humboldt echoes this idea of the artist-martyr:

To the high types of Martyrdom the twentieth century has added the farcical martyr. This, you see, is the artist. By wishing to play a role in the fate of mankind he becomes a bum and a joke.

(Bellow 1975a: 345)

Although ostensibly writing here of the failed artist-hero of his projected film, Humboldt is also clearly writing about himself. Similarly, in the novel itself, whose nominal subject is Humboldt, the explanation of his friend and fellow-artist's life which Citrine undertakes, is also of course an explanation of himself.

After entering so deeply into Humboldt's character and career it was only right that I should take a deeper look also at myself, not judge a dead man who could alter nothing but keep step with him, mortal by mortal, if you know what I mean.

(Bellow 1975a: 163)

In fact, the novel is, above all, about Humboldt's spiritual legacy, about the uncannily intimate - even symbiotic - intellectual relationship between the two men, which endures beyond death and which is symbolised in the second screenplay - an early collaboration - with which Citrine, his own fortunes now at a low ebb, revives his career and provides Humboldt with the posthumous popularity which he had always
craved. It is this aspect of the novel's treatment of American art - its portrait of the artist as a split self, an entity comprised of two individuals, who are friends, rivals, alter egos - that I wish to examine in the light of another, much earlier American novel - Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby.*

Humboldt is fascinated by Fitzgerald, partly because he was rich and decadent ("He adored talking about the rich ... he often mentioned the golden scandals of yesteryear ... Scott Fitzgerald and the Super-Rich") and partly because his wealth and decadence ruined him as an artist and as a man, because he seemed to live out the Faustian legend ("If Scott Fitzgerald had been a Protestant, said Humboldt, Success wouldn't have damaged him so much" [Bellow 1975a: 4, 13]). Success is capitalised because for Humboldt it is an allegorical adversary, like America itself: an opponent of artistic integrity. For Humboldt, Fitzgerald represents the doomed attempt to reconcile Art and Success, the type of the artist who struggles vainly with America. Where Fitzgerald failed, Humboldt hopes to prevail: "He was going to join together the Art Sacrament and the Industrial USA" (Bellow 1975a: 119).

Bellow himself seems to have shared some of Humboldt's ambitions. In an essay entitled "In the Years of Mr. Roosevelt", Bellow confesses that in the thirties, despite his Marxist convictions, he "secretly believed that America *would* in the end prove an exception [to the historical process described by Marx]. America and I, *both* exceptional, would together elude prediction and defy determinism" (Bellow

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51 This theme is also treated, with an added sexual twist, in a number of American novels written after *Humboldt's Gift:* for example, Jerzy Kozinski's *Pinball,* which deals with the relationship between a classical composer fallen on hard times and a reclusive pop star, who share the same lover; Alison Lurie's *The Truth About Lorin Jones,* which deals with Polly Alter's (a failed artist turned art historian) posthumous relationship with Lorin Jones, a dead artist whose biography she is writing, and whose lover becomes hers; and Paul Auster's *The Locked Room* (part of the *New York Trilogy*), in which a hack writer agrees to try and get the work of an old (apparently dead) childhood friend published and ends up marrying his wife and writing his biography, only to discover that he is still alive.
1994: 26). He goes on to discuss the way in which, during this decade, many
immigrants
catching the American fever, changed their names, made up new personalities,
and, energised by these distortions, threw themselves into the life of the country ...
It is not too much to say that these self-created people, people with false
credentials, actors invisibly consumed by guilt and fear of exposure, were often
empire builders.

(Bellow 1994: 26-7)

Roosevelt himself, Bellow argues, "put on the most successful act of all" and
then he enjoins us to "Consider briefly, for the purpose of contrast, the career of
Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby, a pretender who could not forgive himself" (Bellow 1994: 27).
Yet the story of Gatsby's self-creation, empire-building and self-destruction is
redeemed - just as Humboldt's story is redeemed - memorialised in the form of an
American myth - by the friend and collaborator who survives him.

Nick Carraway, the narrator of Fitzgerald's novel, is, so he tells us, a man
"inclined to reserve all judgments," a man gifted with the detachment of the artist, and
with the artist's thirst for originality and truth: he finds fault with the confidences of
his college peers because "they are usually plagiaristic and marred by obvious
suppressions" (Fitzgerald 1983: 7). What he lacks, however, is the audacious vision,
the passion for self-creation, the "overwhelming self-absorption" of the artist
(Fitzgerald 1983: 105). These are the qualities that Gatsby has - "Gatsby, who
represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn" (Fitzgerald 1983: 8).
Actually, Carraway envies, as well as despises, what Gatsby represents. Where
Carraway is reserved - "slow-thinking and full of interior rules that act as brakes on my
desires" - and temperate (he claims to have been "drunk just twice"), Gatsby is
uninhibited and passionate; where Carraway idly dreams of romance ("I liked to walk
up Fifth Avenue and pick out romantic women from the crowd and imagine that in a
few minutes I was going to enter into their lives"), Gatsby devotes his life to the
fulfilment of his romantic ideal (Fitzgerald 1983: 65, 35, 63). In fact, Carraway's admiration for Gatsby extends beyond friendship, to hero-worship and even worship of a more religious kind.

The novel closes with Carraway paying a last, sentimental visit to Gatsby's house and then walking down to the beach.

Most of the big shore places were closed now and there were hardly any lights except the shadowy, moving glow of a ferryboat across the Sound. And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered for Dutch sailors' eyes - a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.

(Fitzgerald 1983: 187-8)

The metaphor of America as a temptress who leads on the Dutch sailors with tantalising glimpses of her virgin territory (the "fresh ... breast") and whispers alluringly to them, seducing them with the promise that she will yield to their colonising designs, pandering to their dreams of possession, compelling them to admire her beauty, is one that has particular resonance for Gatsby's story. Like the first visitors to arrive on American shores, Gatsby "had come a long way" in pursuit of a dream of finding America and making it his own and, like many of them, his quest ends in disillusionment and death (Fitzgerald 1983: 188).^52

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^52 The analogy between Gatsby's dream and that of the original colonists of America appears, less explicitly, in Carraway's earlier description - or rather imaginative reconstruction - of Gatsby's last moments:

I have an idea that Gatsby himself didn't believe it [a telephone message] would come, and perhaps he no longer cared. If that was true, he must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single
From our first glimpse of him, Gatsby is defined as, somehow, quintessentially American.

He was balancing himself on the dashboard of his car with that resourcefulness of movement that is so peculiarly American - that comes, I suppose, with the absence of lifting work in youth and, even more, with the formless grace of our nervous, sporadic games. This quality was continually breaking through his punctilious manner in the shape of restlessness. He was never quite still; there was always a tapping foot somewhere or the impatient opening and closing of a hand.

(Fitzgerald 1983: 70)

Many writers, from Tony Tanner in *City of Words*, to George Pierson in *The Moving American*, have identified restlessness - the impulse to keep moving - as an intrinsically American characteristic, but, more than this, it is the uncertainty surrounding Gatsby's identity - and the resulting myths - that distinguish him as an American phenomenon. Many of these myths are, of course, generated by Gatsby himself. He claims to have been "educated at Oxford," and to have worked "in the drug business and then ... in the oil business" to have sprung from "wealthy people in the Middle West," now deceased, to have lived as "a young rajah in all the capitals of Europe ... collecting jewels ... hunting big game, painting a little" (Fitzgerald 1983: 71-2, 97). Many others are propagated by those uninvited guests who gather at his extravagant parties and who, like Carraway, hide their envy behind an affectation of scorn: Gatsby "killed a man once," was "a German spy during the war," "a bootlegger," and a nephew both to Von Hindenburg and Kaiser Wilhelm (Fitzgerald dream. He must have looked up at an unfamiliar sky through frightening leaves and shivered as he found what a grotesque thing a rose is and how raw the sunlight was upon the scarcely created grass. A new world, material without being real, where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted fortuitously about ... [my italics]

(Fitzgerald 1983: 168)
1983: 50, 67, 38). Gatsby's principal mythologist, however, is Nick Carraway, as the very title of the novel that he has written indicates. According to Carraway, these rumours that circulate around Gatsby are not simply run-of-the-mill gossip but intimations of his allure, of his greatness.

It was testimony to the romantic speculation he inspired that there were whispers about him from those who had found little that it was necessary to whisper about in this world.

(Fitzgerald 1983: 50)

Furthermore, Gatsby's assumed identity is, in Carraway's eyes, not the result of self-loathing or of the sort of romantic delusion of social mobility that intoxicates Clyde Griffiths, but an *artistic* decision, a wholesale reinvention of history, an act of self-creation.

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53 Clyde (the hero of Dreiser's novel *An American Tragedy*, published in the same year as Fitzgerald's novel) is intoxicated, and ultimately destroyed, by the American dream of self-improvement. The son of poor missionaries, as a young boy Clyde "was constantly thinking of how he might better himself" (Dreiser 1959: 26) and when he manages to get a job at his rich uncle's shirt-collar factory it seems as though his ambitions may be fulfilled. However, he is made to start at the lowest rung and is shunned socially by his wealthy cousins. After attempting "to impress on his uncle that he was cut out for something better" Clyde is promoted but continues to pine in vain to be "taken up by them [his cousins]" and begins an affair with Roberta Alden - one of the women of whom he now has charge (Dreiser 1959: 234, 238). However, he soon falls in love with the rich and glamorous Sondra Finchley, seduced as much by what she represents as anything else ("That wonderful girl! That beauty! That world of wealth and social position she lived in!") and when he discovers that he has made Roberta pregnant he panics (Dreiser 1959: 340). He takes her out boating intending to kill her, but lacks the resolve to do so; instead, he strikes her in a gesture of instinctive revulsion as she approaches him, the boat overturns and he ignores her pleas for help, leaving her to drown. After a trial that is recorded in painstaking detail (it takes up most of the second half of the novel), Clyde is sentenced to death. At the end of the novel, Clyde is "greatly troubled by his inability to demonstrate to himself even - either his guilt or his lack of guilt", but Dreiser is clear where the guilt lies - with a society that encourages material self-advancement at the expense of self-knowledge (Dreiser 1959: 842).
I suppose he'd had the name ready for a long time, even then. His parents were shiftless and unsuccessful farm people - his imagination had never really accepted them as his parents at all. The truth was that Jay Gatsby sprung from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God ... and he must be about his Father's business, the service of a vast, vulgar and meretricious beauty. So he invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen-year-old boy would be likely to invent, and to this conception he was faithful to the end.

(Fitzgerald 1983: 105)

Here, as elsewhere in the novel, Carraway gets rather carried away in his desire to imbue Gatsby with greatness, while at the same time insisting on his essential conformity. Gatsby is both typical - "he invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen-year-old boy would be likely to invent" - and exceptional - "Jay Gatsby sprung from his Platonic conception of himself", both coarsely materialistic - in "the service of a vast, vulgar and meretricious beauty" and resolutely spiritual - "to this conception he was faithful to the end". Whose conception is this, though? As much Carraway's as Gatsby's, I suspect.

Carraway tells us early on that he was "rather literary in college", but, until he meets Gatsby, he is an author without a subject; similarly, Gatsby is a fabulist in search of a fable (Fitzgerald 1983: 10). Carraway constructs the fable that gives meaning to Gatsby's life; Gatsby's life provides the history that Carraway can transform into myth. From the outset, Carraway is fascinated by Gatsby and inclined to read mysterious meaning into his every word and gesture. Initially, it is Gatsby's apparent self-possession that bewitches Carraway, from whom "any exhibition of complete self-sufficiency draws a stunned tribute" (Fitzgerald 1983: 15). After their first conversation, Carraway notes that

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54 This is a variation on Freud's theory of the "family romance" - the child's fantasy that its real parents are more exalted figures than those it knows as its parents.
He smiled understandingly - much more than understandingly. It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life. It faced - or seemed to face - the whole eternal world for an instant, and then concentrated on you with an irresistible prejudice in your favour. It understood you just as far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself, and assured you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey. Precisely at that point it vanished - and I was looking at an elegant young rough-neck, a year or two over thirty, whose elaborate formality of speech just missed being absurd. (Fitzgerald 1983: 54)

Again, Carraway manages to be both humbly awestruck and haughtily dismissive of Gatsby at the same time. The extraordinary, metaphysical (note the repetition of the word eternal) significance that Carraway perceives in Gatsby's smile gives way to the reductive recognition of its owner as "an elegant young rough-neck," but Carraway takes away from this first meeting the conviction that Gatsby is "a person of some undefined consequence" (Fitzgerald 1983: 70).

Gatsby's smile reappears several times during the novel, notably at the end of this evening of their first (formal) meeting ("He smiled - and suddenly there seemed to be a pleasant significance in having been among the last to go, as if he had desired it all the time") and at their very last meeting, when Carraway impulsively affirms his affection by telling Gatsby "You're worth the whole damn bunch put together" and, in response, Gatsby's face breaks "into that radiant and understanding smile, as if we'd been in cahoots all the time" (Fitzgerald 1983 60, 160). There is a homoerotic element to the attraction between the two men, which Carraway's description of Gatsby's smile hints at, but the real bond between them is their unspoken understanding that they are engaged in a common pursuit - their sense of being "in cahoots", or, one might say, of collaborating on a joint artistic project.

When Carraway is told of Gatsby's love for Daisy, "He [Gatsby] came alive to me, suddenly delivered from the womb of his purposeless splendour" (Fitzgerald 1983: 85). Now that Gatsby's extavagance has a purpose, now that the character of
Gatsby has been given a motivation, he comes alive in Carraway's imagination. When he is asked to play the role of Pandarus to Gatsby's Troilus and Daisy's Criseyde, this process goes a stage further: from this point on, Gatsby is not simply a character in Carraway's mind, another of the "abnormal ... wild, unknown men" who forced their confidences on him at college, but an alter ego, a surrogate self (Fitzgerald 1983: 7). Gatsby's concern that Carraway think well of him ("I didn't want you to think I was just some nobody", he tells him) is reciprocated by Carraway's efforts to ensure that Gatsby's tryst with Daisy is a success (Fitzgerald 1983: 73).

When Daisy first arrives at Carraway's house, she thinks that it is he who is in love with her and indeed he acts as though he were, his embarrassment as acute as that of the lovers (his heart gives a "loud beating" and his face assumes "a deep tropical burn" [Fitzgerald 1983: 93] ). After leaving them alone for some time, Carraway returns and Gatsby insists that he accompany them on a tour of his (Gatsby's) house. Later, Carraway offers to leave them alone again, "but they wouldn't hear of it; perhaps my presence made them feel more satisfactorily alone" (Fitzgerald 1983: 101). If Carraway's presence fails to disturb the lovers - and according to his account they seem oblivious to it - his attention is entirely engaged by them. He carefully traces Gatsby's fluctuating emotions.

He had passed visibly through two states and was entering upon a third. After his embarrassment and his unreasoning joy he was consumed with wonder at her presence. He had been full of the idea so long, dreamed it right through to the end, waited with his teeth set, so to speak, at an inconceivable pitch of intensity. Now, in the reaction, he was running down like an over-wound clock.

(Fitzgerald 1983: 99)

As with his earlier description of Gatsby's flight from home and his adoption of a new name as the execution of a long-cherished "Platonic conception of himself," so here Carraway sees Gatsby's reunion with Daisy as the fruition of an idea planted long ago [my italics] (Fitzgerald 1983: 105). That Gatsby has looked forward to this
meeting, and has planned it, over the last five years, is indisputable, but what lies behind this plan, the mystery that is Gatsby - this is what fascinates Carraway (and the reader). For Carraway, although it might have begun with his love for Daisy, it has evolved into something more, into an aesthetic quest.

There must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams - not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion. It had gone beyond her, beyond everything. He had thrown himself into it with a creative passion, adding to it all the time,decking it out with every bright feather that drifted his way. No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man can store up in his ghostly heart. [my italics]

(Fitzgerald 1983: 103)

The disillusionment - literally the removal of the illusion, the exposure of the gulf between the Platonic Idea which Carraway attributes to Gatsby and its earthly shadow - that Carraway imagines Gatsby feels on this occasion becomes actual after Daisy attends one of his parties and is unimpressed. Disconsolate, Gatsby confesses to Carraway that he "feel[s] far away from her" but still harbours hope of reanimating their old state of mutual intoxication.

He talked a lot about the past and I gathered that he wanted to recover something, some idea of himself perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy. [my italics]

(Fitzgerald 1983: 117)

Gatsby tells him about the first time he kissed Daisy, five years previously.

Out of the corner of his eye Gatsby saw that the blocks of the sidewalks really formed a ladder and mounted to a secret place above the trees - he could climb to it, if he climbed alone, and once there he could suck on the pap of life, gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder ...

He knew that when he kissed this girl, and forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God.

(Fitzgerald 1983: 118)
The hyperbole of Carraway's language when he talks of Gatsby's imagination ("inconceivable ... intensity"; "colossal vitality"; "unutterable visions"), and his representation of Gatsby as an artist - here as a godhead, the ultimate artist - is insistent, but is it convincing? Do we really share Carraway's belief in Gatsby's transcendent vision? Do we see, as Carraway does, a redeeming spirituality behind the "appalling sentimentality"? (Fitzgerald 1983: 118)

Reviewing Gatsby's affair with Daisy later in the novel, Carraway asks rhetorically whether we can doubt that there was "some intensity in his conception of the affair that couldn't be measured?" [my italics] (Fitzgerald 1983: 158). Carraway's complacent assumption of our agreement here is, I would suggest, not warranted by what we actually see or hear of Gatsby in the novel. Without Carraway's mediation, interpretation and explanation of Gatsby, there is little to suggest that he is the heroic, the tragic, the great figure that Carraway would have us believe he is. When Gatsby confounds Tom Buchanan's sneers directed at his alleged career at Oxford, by revealing that he had indeed spent five months there as part of a programme organised for American officers after the Armistice, Carraway exults in his friend's moral victory.

I wanted to get up and slap him on the back. I had one of those complete renewals of faith in him that I'd experienced before. (Fitzgerald 1983: 135)

This remark reveals the true nature of Carraway's devotion to Gatsby - it is not simply the devotion of a friend, but the belief, the faith, of a disciple in his god. After his death, when all his other - fairweather - friends desert him, Carraway develops "a feeling of defiance, of scornful solidarity between Gatsby and me against them all" and, seen in this light, his account of Gatsby's life is not simply a testimonial to a dead friend, not simply an apologia for, and vindication of, Gatsby: it is Carraway's
witnessing of Gatsby's greatness (Fitzgerald 1983: 172). This is not to suggest that Carraway has written a hagiography or the gospel according to Gatsby, however.

Rather, *The Great Gatsby* is both a novel about the revelation of Gatsby's self-created greatness and a novel of self-revelation, self-inquiry and self-explanation. In writing the novel, Carraway expiates his guilt at having failed to save his friend from his fate, and, through his treatment of Gatsby's artistic genius, discovers his own, creating an American myth about American myth-making.

Something similar is going on in *Humboldt's Gift*. Like Carraway, Citrine is moved to write about his friend partly out of guilt. After a period of estrangement following Humboldt's accusations that Citrine had plagiarised his character for his Broadway hit *Von Trench*, Citrine sees his old friend, now destitute and looking "gray stout sick dusty" (Bellow 1975a: 7), and, rather than face him with the implied reproach of his own good health and wealth, he hides behind a parked car:

> I looked well. Besides, there was money in my pockets and I had been window-shopping on Madison Avenue ... So how could I talk to Humboldt?  
> (Bellow 1975a: 8)

It was over money, indeed, that the two had fallen out in the first place. Humboldt claims a share of the profits of *Von Trench* are due to him and when Citrine refuses, he cashes a blank cheque that the two had exchanged as a symbol of their friendship to the tune of over three hundred thousand pounds. Moreover, when Humboldt goes on record to excoriate his old friend, money is his theme:

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55 This reading is strengthened by the incident, near the end of the novel, when Carraway, on his final visit to Gatsby's house, discovers "an obscene word" scrawled on the white steps and proceeds to erase it, "drawing my shoe raspingly along the stone" (Fitzgerald 1983: 187). This seems to me the action of a pious believer, offended by a blasphemy at the site of a shrine and resolving to obliterate the profanity.
"Take the case of Charlie Citrine. He arrived from Madison, Wisconsin, and knocked on my door. Now he's got a million bucks. What kind of writer or intellectual makes that kind of dough ... ?"

(Bellow 1975a: 2)

Once Humboldt is dead, Citrine cannot make fiscal reparations - indeed, it is ironically Humbolt, "act[ing] from the grave," who digs Citrine out from his financial hole - but he can try and redeem Humboldt's reputation as an artist.

Once, of course, Humboldt's reputation needed no redeeming. His first collection, *Harlequin Ballads*, was "an immediate hit"; "Conrad Aiken praised him, T. S. Eliot took favorable notice of his poems, and even Yvor Winters had a good word to say for him" (Bellow 1975a: 1, 11).

Like Gatsby, however, those who were keen to associate with him when his fame was at his height have no time for him when his fortunes slump and his poems are omitted from all the latest anthologies.

The bastards, the literary funeral directors and politicians who put together these collections had no use for old-hat Humboldt.

(Bellow 1975a: 5)

Just as Gatsby is for Carraway both the subject of a tribute to his (Gatsby's) artistic prowess and the inspiration for an exhibition of his own, so for Citrine Humboldt's death provides him with the opportunity to revive his own career by vaunting the achievements of another. Just as Carraway both reveres and reviles Gatsby, so Citrine feels a mixture of pity, awe and distaste for Humboldt. Whereas Carraway only finally sheds all scepticism and becomes a true believer in Gatsby's powers after his death, however, Citrine begins his career as Humboldt's devout admirer, and, although he becomes personally disillusioned with him, never loses his faith in his mentor's artistic vision, and in his capacity for self-creation. As with
Carraway's account of Gatsby, however, what this vision is - what it is that makes Humboldt a great artist - is far from clear.

Certainly, there is much that is enchanting, even mesmeric, about Humboldt's presence, if Citrine is to be believed. He is "beautiful deep eloquent fragrant original", "handsome, fair, large, serious, witty", possesses "princeliness and dignity" and "women dreaming of love might have visions of Humboldt at twenty stepping down from a Renaissance or an Impressionist masterpiece" (as with Carraway's portrait of Gatsby, there seems more than a touch of hero-worship here), but when the young Citrine travels all the way from the University of Wisconsin to Greenwich Village "to have a look at him" it is, above all, his conversation that impresses, even bewitches, him (Bellow 1975a: 161, 2, 54, 11). We are repeatedly told of Humboldt's extraordinary rhetorical gifts: "He was a wonderful talker, a hectic nonstop monologuist and improvisator, a champion detractor"; "the Mozart of conversation"; "he discussed machinery, luxury, command, capitalism, technology, Mammon, Orpheus and poetry, the riches of the human heart, America, world civilisation"; (Bellow 1975a: 4, 13, 21). We are encouraged to see his conversation as an art-form, analogous to opera: "His monologue was an oratorio in which he sang and played all parts"; "he passed from statement to recitative, from recitative he soared into aria, and behind him played an orchestra of intimations, virtues, love of his art, veneration of its great men" (Bellow 1975a: 11, 30). As with Herzog's sense of humour and Gatsby's genius, however, we are never _shown_ any of this verbal brilliance directly, we are asked to take it on trust. In part this may be a technical problem: is Bellow capable of doing justice, in the form of direct dramatisation, to such a figure? There is also, however, the implication that Citrine is idealising Humboldt, or that he is collaborating with him, in his project of self-creation and self-idealisation. We never see any of

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56 See my discussion of Bellow's comedy in Chapter 1.
Humboldt's poetry either, but instead, as with his conversation, we have Citrine's description of it.

The ballads were pure, musical, witty, radiant, humane. I think they were Platonic. By Platonic I refer to an original perfection to which all human beings long to return.

(Bellow 1975a: 11)

Like Carraway's admiration of Gatsby's "Platonic conception of himself," Citrine's characterisation of Humboldt's poetry as Platonic says as much about what he wants Humboldt to be (an artist who creates himself according to an original, unspoilt blueprint) as what he actually is.

Citrine is nominated by his brother as "an American expert," he himself claims to have special insight when it comes to American matters ("I could read a little in the great mysterious book of urban America," he tells us), and Humboldt's Gift is full of digressions that might have come directly from his book The Sense of Being in The USA: "America is a didactic country ... "; "America was God's experiment ... "; "History had created something new in the USA ... "; (Bellow 1975a: 401, 266, 65, 162, 221). Humboldt's life and death offers Citrine the chance to expound his thesis on America, to create out of Humboldt's history, as Carraway does out of Gatsby's, an American myth. In the same way as Carraway reads Gatsby's career as a self-conscious attempt to live out an American dream, and Gatsby himself as an American tragic hero, Citrine sees Humboldt's tragedy as deriving from his attachment to, and dependence on, "the noble idea of being an American poet" [my italics] (Bellow 1975a: 6). Humboldt's project of Platonic self-creation was doomed to failure, Citrine suggests, because it was anachronistic.
In ancient times poetry was a force, the poet had real strength in the material world. Of course the material world was different then. But what interest could a Humboldt raise? He threw himself into weakness and became a hero of wretchedness.

(Bellow 1975a: 155)

Although Citrine acknowledges that Humboldt was residually aware that the exigencies of American life posed a threat to the idealism of the artist - "He told me that poets ought to figure out how to get around prag matic America" - his portrait of Humboldt actually conforms to the myth of the American artist destroyed because he is "too frail to stand up to the unpoetic power of the USA" (Bellow 1975a: 133).

Humboldt's political naïvety is illustrated early on in the novel in his premature euphoria at the prospect of Adlai Stevenson becoming president ("If Stevenson is in, literature is in - we're in, Charlie. Stevenson reads my poems") and his dream of creating a partnership between "the Art Sacrament and the USA as equal powers" - a synthesis of aestheticism and materialism - is exposed as the delusion of a madman, but as the noble delusion of a heroic madman (Bellow 1975a: 26, 119). Instead of criticising Humboldt for his lack of realism, Citrine sees his romanticism (as Carraway does Gatsby's) as evidence of his credentials as a true artist, a tragic figure crushed by "the overwhelming phenemenon" that is America: "Poets have to dream, and dreaming in America was no cinch" (Bellow 1975a: 306, 312). "America was a harsh trial to the human spirit," Citrine tells us, and Humboldt's spirit was not resilient enough to survive (Bellow 1975a: 383). Of his other best friend (and erstwhile collaborator on the abortive magazine The Ark), Pierre Thaxter, Citrine remarks that he "was a real American in that, like Walt Whitman, he offered himself as an archetype" and this is also true of Humboldt (Bellow 1975a: 285). For Citrine, Humboldt's significance is, finally, symbolic, exemplary: he is the archetype of the dead poet vanquished by the superior might of America.
The country is proud of its dead poets. It takes terrific satisfaction in the poet's testimony that the USA is too tough, too big, too much, too rugged, that American reality is overpowering.

(Bellow 1975a: 118)

Like Roth's heuristic American writer whose imagination is dwarfed by the immense audacity of American reality, Humboldt retreats into himself and becomes increasingly paranoid. To the question "What can the writer do with so much of the American reality as it is?", Humboldt has no answer: all he can do in the face of American reality is succumb, and die (Roth 1985b: 180).

Fortunately, other writers have found alternative ways of dealing with the challenge posed by America. In the mid-seventies, Bellow, Heller and Roth all wrote American myths about American myth-makers, but whether in doing so they themselves were guilty of withdrawing from American reality is a moot point. After all, as James Oliver Robertson points out, myths are not necessarily the opposite of realities.

We contrast myth and reality; the one is mistaken, unreal, false, a lie; the other is objective, understandable, real, the truth. But the "truth" about a people, the "truth" about America and Americans, resides both in American myths and in American realities. The myths are part of the world we live in, so were they part of our grandfathers' world. If we would understand our world, or anyone else's, we must understand its myths as well as - indeed, as part of - its realities.

(Robertson 1980: xv-xvi)
CONCLUSION

This thesis grew out of my encounter with three books - Mosby’s Memoirs, Portnoy’s Complaint and Something Happened - many of whose preoccupations (with Jewishness, with notions of selfhood, with the nature of comedy) seemed to coincide with my own. When, as a recent graduate, I first canvassed opinion on the possibility of working on these three writers, I was told that the subject was passé (Jewish-American novelists had been “done” in the sixties and seventies), but the more I read, the more convinced I became that I had something to say that was worthwhile (all three writers were still writing, much of the existing criticism on them seemed parochial, devoid of any sense of how they fitted into the larger literary-historical scheme of things, and no one had looked at them together as a sample grouping of contemporary Jewish-American comic novelists). Although I began by positing a degree of kinship between the three writers (one which would not, however, admit of many generalisations applicable to all three), as my research proceeded, I found myself becoming increasingly aware of, and interested in, their differences, which I now feel to be as important as their similarities.

Certainly there are points of coincidence. All three display profound ambivalence towards the roles of comic writer, Jewish writer and American writer, sometimes embracing these labels, sometimes resisting them, sometimes simultaneously embracing and resisting them. That these labels do exert an influence on their work is clear (to resist, no less than to embrace a particular context for one’s work is to be influenced by it, albeit negatively), but because the boundaries of these labels are constantly shifting (what we understand as "comedy", "Jewishness" and "Americanness" is subject to a perpetual process of revision), as are the terms of the authors’ own self-explanations, the relationship between the two cannot be fixed. Just as the texts defy easy categorisation, so the categories themselves defy easy definitions, so that the uses and limitations of contextualisation are negotiated afresh with each
reading. Rather than arriving at definitive judgments, I hope that the thesis has shown
that the contexts of comedy, Jewishness and Americanness are productively unstable,
in the sense that the fluidity of their boundaries enables them to accommodate the
instabilities of the authors' self-explanations. Instead of a pithy set of conclusions,
then, I would like give a brief account of where my readings of these writers have led
me (where I stand in relation to them, and where they stand in relation to each other).

Having begun with the sense that Bellow and Roth were intimately connected as
writers (encouraged by Roth's own frank admission, in Reading Myself and Others,
and elsewhere, of the crucial importance of Bellow as a role-model, and by the
evidence of Bellow's favourable review of Roth's first book, Goodbye, Columbus, a
review that bore all the hallmarks of a master inducting an apprentice into the literary
guild), and that Heller stood apart from them, I feel now that Bellow and Heller
occupy opposing positions at either end of a spectrum of contemporary fiction,
positions which Roth uneasily straddles.

Of the three writers, Bellow's work has the most cohesion. From his first novel,
Dangling Man, whose narrator poses the question "How should a good man live; what
ought he to do?" and claims that "We are all drawn toward the same craters of the
spirit - to know what we are and what we are for, to know our purpose, to seek grace"
(Bellow 1946: 39, 154), to his last, More Die of Heartbreak, whose narrator wishes to
fathom "The secret of our being" and "The meaning of human love", Bellow's
protagonists have always "had a weakness for the big issues" (Bellow 1987a: 330,
292). The greatest variations in his work have been formal, rather than thematic.
From the economy and restraint of his first two novels, Bellow moved towards a more
expansive, discursive mode before apparently returning, in recent years, to a preference
for shorter forms of fiction. In the Preface to his most recent work, Something To
Remember Me By, Bellow comments on this trend.
in my early years I wrote more than one fat book. It's difficult for me now to read those early novels, not because they lack interest but because I find myself editing them, slimming down my sentences and cutting whole paragraphs.

(Bellow 1993: v)

In fact, the tension between the desire to render faithfully the movements of interior consciousness in all its minutiae (with its repetitions, its digressions, its excesses), and the fear of solipsism, between the impulse to give free rein to his linguistic virtuosity and intellectual agility, and the fear of garrulousness, persists, unresolved, throughout Bellow's career. Compare, for instance, the openings of *Dangling Man* and *More Die Of Heartbreak*.

There was a time when people were in the habit of addressing themselves frequently and felt no shame of making a record of their inward transactions. But to keep a journal nowadays is considered a kind of self-indulgence, a weakness, and in poor taste. For this is an era of hard-boiled-dom ... Do you have an inner life? It is nobody's business but your own.

(Bellow 1946: 9)

Last year while he was passing through a crisis in his life my Uncle Benn (B. Crader, the well-known botanist) showed me a cartoon by Charles Addams. It was an ordinary cartoon, good for a smile, but Uncle was hung up on it and wanted to discuss it elaborately. I didn't feel like analyzing a cartoon. He insisted. He mentioned it in so many connections that I became irritated and considered having the damn thing framed for his birthday.

(Bellow 1987a: 9)

Bellow's first novel begins with a declaration in favour of interiority, in opposition to the prevailing preference of the time for Hemingwayesque objectivity. Joseph, Bellow's narrator, is going through a crisis and he intends to talk about it, and talk about it, "and if I had as many mouths as Siva has arms and kept them going all the time, I still could not do myself justice" (Bellow 1946: 9). From this, we might expect a work of wilful excess - of self-indulgent revelation. Instead, we get a concentrated, carefully-wrought, at times perhaps over-wrought novel. Bellow's last novel, *More Die of Heartbreak*, also opens with a man in crisis, but this time that man
is not the narrator himself, but his uncle, and the narrator wishes he would keep it to
himself. Whereas *Dangling Man* opens with a self-consciously rhetorical statement,
telling us something about Joseph's nature but little about his circumstances, Kenneth
Trachtenberg, the narrator of *More Die of Heartbreak*, addresses us informally,
managing nevertheless to incorporate a good deal of exposition - informing us of the
nature of the relationship between himself and his uncle, of his uncle's profession and
status, as well as indicating the presence of a "crisis" that will form the narrative centre
of the novel. From this, we might expect a well-constructed, economical novel with a
strong linear narrative. Instead, we get a book that, despite Kenneth's demurrals ("All
this may appear to be about *me*. It really isn't; it's about Uncle Benn" [Bellow 1987a:
73-4] ), devotes itself in large measure to a series of his own diffuse meditations on
topics ranging from East-West relations to female sexuality. Kenneth is continually
vowing that he will "not be sidetracked again"\(^1\) and stressing the compelling nature of
his narrative ("I have an urgent project to get on with"; "I'm in a hurry and I can't stop
to pick and choose among the available terms" [Bellow 1987a: 29] ), but the whole
movement of the novel (which is centrifugal, rather than centripetal) mitigates against
intensity or brevity.

Bellow's "fat books" are, to borrow Bellow's own description of Joyce's *Ulysses*,
"comed[ies] of information" in which the protagonists struggle to remain afloat "in an
ocean of random facts ... threatened with inanity or disintegration", or, in Kenneth's
formula, to "Abolish the claustrophobia of consciousness" (Bellow 1975b: 13); his thin
books are the precipitates of this struggle. My own preference is for the latter - I
believe that Bellow thrives when placing himself under the constraints of the short-
story and novella forms - but, as I have suggested, it is hardly possible to imagine one
without the other.

\(^1\) See p. 21, f.n.\(^{12}\).
If Bellow's *oeuvre* is very much that - a distinctive body of work with a recognisable pattern and a consistency of purpose, Heller's is rather more difficult to approach in this way. Although there are stylistic and thematic affinities between his different novels, there are more disjunctions than conjunctions between them. From a third-person novel that seemed to most contemporary observers to be an anti-war satire, and to partake of a current trend of fiction towards anarchic, "black humour", Heller moved (so slowly that its perennial non-appearance took on the proportions of Harold Brodkey's *The Runaway Soul*) towards an extended interior monologue that seemed to most of its reviewers an ill-advised, if not perverse, rejection of its predecessor's surreal comedy in favour of a sterile social realism.

*Something Happened* seems to me an extraordinary exploration of the relationship between consciousness and memory, a novel that in some respects has more in common with Proust than with the post-modernist contemporaries (Vonnegut, Barth, Pynchon etc.) in whose company Heller is commonly placed. Compare, for example, the following passages, from *Remembrance of Things Past* and *Something Happened*.

> even for a few moments after such a sleep ["sleeping like a log"] is ended ... One is no longer a person. How then, searching for one's thoughts, one's personality, as one searches for a lost object, does one recover one's self rather than any other? Why, when one begins again to think, is it not a personality other than the previous one that becomes incarnate in one? ... What is it that guides us, when there has been a real interruption - whether it be that our consciousness has been complete or our dreams entirely different from ourselves? ... The resurrection at our awakening - after the beneficent attack of mental alienation which is sleep - must after all be similar to what occurs when we recall a name, a line, a refrain that we had forgotten.

(Proust 1987: 86)

I am surprized when I awake in the morning after a seizure of insomnia to realize I have been asleep; I am often aghast upon awakening from a sound, dreamless sleep to realize how far away from life I have been, and how defenceless I was while I was there ... I might be unable to return. I don't like to lose consciousness entirely. Dreams ... are my only contact with reality when I sleep ... I am out of existence. Where am I, then, when I am not? ... Where will I be in that
bottomless, measureless time between the moment [when I lose consciousness] ... and the moment the first thought stirs in my brain and I, like Jesus from the cave or Lazurus from the grave, am miraculously resurrected. I think an authentic miracle takes place in the universe every time I come awake again after going to sleep. What is happening to me when I am not conscious of myself? Where do I go? ... Who watches over me to make sure I get back?

(Heller 1974: 169-70)

It is perhaps surprising to find in two narrators so far apart temporally and temperamentally as Marcel and Bob Slocum, the same questioning of the everyday phenomenon that ensures continuity between one day's self and the next. Yet the similarities extend beyond a common fascination with the nature of selfhood.

For Freud, the "dream-work" is often disturbing because it involves the release of ordinarily repressed psychic impulses, because it bypasses the censorship exercised by the conscious mind and reveals unconscious desires in all their lurid atavism. The disquieting quality of the dreaming state for Marcel and Bob, however, derives not so much from the sense that sleep opens up a Pandora's Box of unacknowledged impulses, as from the sense that it involves a state of non-being, an absence of self, a lacuna of consciousness. For Marcel the self is "lost" in sleep, like an "object"; for Bob, too, to sleep is not to become other but to be "not"; for both men the recovery of their former selves from the abyss of unconsciousness seems miraculous (they both use the image of resurrection), an improbable mystery that can only be the result of some unknown, benign agency that "guides" or "watches over" them.

After a novel which incorporated such Proustian meditations on the nature of selfhood within the framework of an exhaustive, exhausting (yet ultimately exhilarating, in the brilliance of its execution) investigation into the psyche of an American businessman, Heller seemed to have set his stall out as a serious - indeed, difficult - writer. For his third novel, however, he produced a light-hearted comedy that by his own admission lacked depth. *Good As Gold* certainly has its moments and works well as a parody (of the sort of Jewish-American novel, of which there had by
now been a whole spate, in which the protagonist struggles to reconcile the two parts of his hyphenated identity, but its characters (with the exception of Gold's brother, Sid, and father, Julius) are predictable caricatures and many of its jokes seem to be etiolated versions of earlier ones in *Catch-22*. *God Knows* represents a more serious investigation of the relationship between the writer and his Jewishness and to that extent seemed to suggest some continuity in Heller's career (some thought that he had now found his identity as a writer), but with *Picture This* Heller bucked the trend before it really had time to become one, presenting as a novel a work that was part art history, part historical essay and part fantasy.

Partly due to this erratic career pattern, Heller is a writer who has seemed less interesting to critics with each new work (critics like to be able to categorise their subjects) and when I began the thesis, the jury was still out on, as Robert Merrill puts it at the end of his study, "Whether Heller deserves to stand with the very best recent writers" (Merrill 1987: 125).² Now his status as a "serious" writer and position in the literary canons of the next century seem more doubtful than ever, in spite of - or perhaps because of - the publication of his latest novel, *Closing Time*, a sort of sequel to *Catch-22*. The mere fact of Heller (a writer who, as I have been suggesting, had seemed to invent himself anew with each book that he published) choosing to return to his first novel for inspiration seemed inauspicious, but as it turns out, it is his departure from old habits, rather than his rehabilitation of old characters, that is responsible for the most serious flaws in what is by some way his weakest novel.

Heller has always acknowledged that narrative description is not his forte, and one of his virtues as a novelist has always been a lack of pretentiousness. Perversely, then, he stuffs this novel full of long descriptive scenes and clumsy, gratuitous cultural

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² Merrill sits on the fence, saying only that "a positive answer seems distinctly possible" (Merrill 1987: 125).
allusions, such as this laboured analogy between Yossarian and his favourite Wagnerian hero:

Like the hero Siegfried in *Götterdämmerung* ... Yossarian himself began what he was later to look back on as his own Rhine Journey with a rapid clutch of daylight lovemaking: Siegfried in his mountain aerie, Yossarian around noon in his M & M office ... Siegfried had Brünnhilde, now mortal, and the rocky haunt they shared. Yossarian had his nurse, Melissa MacIntosh, most human also, and a desktop ...

(Heller 1994a: 291)

Heller's novel ends with an apocalyptic vision and its title\(^3\) is portentously eschatological, but it would be a shame if his career were to end on this somewhat bathetic note. There is, at any rate, a real need for a comprehensive re-evaluation of his achievements, one that will give more consideration than I have been able to here to the formal complexities of the novels.

If Bellow and Heller represent the two poles of the thesis, then, in terms of their current literary-critical stock and the coherence of their work, Roth stands somewhere between the two. Although his later work has focused intensely on questions of Jewish identity, the relationship between life and fiction, and the ethics of reading and writing, the earlier years of his career were characterised by what Roth himself describes as "a self-conscious and deliberate zigzag ... each book veering sharply away from the one before" (Roth 1985b: 83-4). In part this zigzag was the result of Roth's resolution to make it new - not to repeat himself (a resolution that in recent years has come to seem increasingly ironic, as he has been accused of doing just that) - but it

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\(^3\) Bellow identifies the phrase in his Nobel acceptance speech with a chic nihilism which he condemns:

we hear that this is closing time in the gardens of the West, that the end of our capitalist civilization is at hand ... I am not sure whether this should be called intellectual analysis or analysis by intellectuals.

(Bellow 1994: 95)
was also, I would suggest, partly the consequence of the way in which he was read, by critics and ordinary readers. After being accused of anti-Semitism as a result of his first book, *Goodbye Columbus*, Roth reacted initially by moving away from the inflammatory material of this collection in his first two novels (*Letting Go* and *When She Was Good*), before issuing a figurative two fingers to his Jewish critics with *Portnoy's Complaint* and then revelling in his new-found notoriety with "On The Air" (which featured a "mental defective" called Scoop with an ice-cream scoop instead of a hand) and *Our Gang* (which had Richard Nixon assassinated, drowned naked in a sealed bag filled with water), as well as *The Breast* and *The Great American Novel*. This phase was followed by a partial return to high seriousness with *My Life as a Man*, *Reading Myself and Others*, *The Professor of Desire* and *The Ghost Writer*, a move precipitated, I believe, by Irving Howe's vituperative 1972 piece "Philip Roth Reconsidered". That he was stung by Howe's criticisms is clear from their appearance (almost verbatim) some twenty years later, in *The Anatomy Lesson*, by which time the risqué Roth had returned with a (literal) vengeance. As with the early furore over *Goodbye Columbus* (which, ironically, Howe had praised), then, Roth's reaction to the outrage over *Portnoy's Complaint* and its immediate successors seems to have gone through two phases - an initial defensive retreat into more "respectable" work, and then an aggressive counter-reaction. If this pattern has been broken in recent years, that may well be because Roth's work no longer seems to inspire the sort of violent antipathy that it once did, rather than because Roth himself has grown indifferent to such responses.

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4 In an interview with Sara Davidson in 1977, Roth claimed: "I haven't read the reviews of my books since 1972" (Roth 1977b: 52). I feel sure that this date is no coincidence and that, rather than general fatigue, as Roth implies, his decision was the direct result of Howe's piece (Howe was, after all, a writer whom Roth had admired and who had praised Roth's debut, so that his "reconsideration" must have been particularly painful, the more so as it was couched in the very Jamesian language of moral sensibility that Roth himself had employed in his early days as a writer).
In a sense, then, Roth combines Bellow's single-mindedness\(^5\) and Heller's restlessness, Bellow's linguistic virtuosity and Heller's daring formal experimentation. Whereas Heller does not give the critic enough to chew on, Roth if anything gives too much, compulsively analysing his own work in what some see as a neurotic desire for control or a narcissistic self-obsession. Whereas Bellow doggedly continues to plough his thematic furrows, Roth's relentless self-explanations seem to some like a dog returning to its own vomit, but for me Roth's ruthless project of self-examination and self-invention, while it may have been responsible, as much as his dependence on Halcion, for his breakdown in the mid-eighties, has also been responsible for some of the most brilliant writing of that period (particularly in *The Ghost Writer* and *The Counterlife*).

Unlike Bellow (who will be eighty later this year) and Heller (who will be seventy-two and who has always written very slowly), Roth, at sixty-two as prolific as ever, may well, in the years to come, add significantly to what is already a considerable body of work.\(^6\) That the controversy over his early work seems to have died down a little is certainly good news for his critical reputation (perhaps now we can look forward to sensitive revisitings of earlier, neglected works, such as *Letting Go* and *The Breast*), but may prove a mixed blessing for Roth as a writer.\(^7\) As I have tried to

\(^5\) Nicely illustrated by a joke which Bellow has told on more than one occasion as a self-explanatory metaphor for his own compulsion to rework old themes. An opera singer is recalled repeatedly by the insistent applause of his audience, demanding that he reprise his piece. Eventually, the exhausted tenor asks "How long must I continue to rehearse my part?" and someone in the audience replies "Until you get it right".

\(^6\) As I write this, Roth's new novel, *Sabbath's Theatre*, which has garnered his most favourable reviews since *The Counterlife*, is about to be published.

\(^7\) In a review of *Operation Shylock*, S.T. Meravi quotes from the novel:

"Marlboro has the Marlboro Man, Israel has the Holocaust Man ... FOR THE SMOKE-SCREEN THAT HIDES EVERYTHING, SMOKE HOLOCAUST."

A generation ago a rude joke like that by Philip Roth would inspire a firestorm of response from American Jews. Today it seems to draw no response whatsoever.
indicate, Roth's career up till now has (perhaps to a unique degree) seemed to take shape in response to (and to take as its subject) the reception of his work. If, as one reviewer of his most recent novel suggested, he has "lost an estimable readership", he may have lost his most fertile source of inspiration (Meravi 1993: 26). On the other hand, Roth's technical gifts and the range of his narrative modes (from the diffuse, extravagant, hyperbolic *The Great American Novel* to the elliptical, spare, understated *Deception*) should ensure that whatever he turns to next will be noteworthy. It would be ironic indeed if, in a self-reflexive joke that he himself might have conceived, Roth was to endure the fate envisaged by his most notorious creation, Alexander Portnoy, and be remembered chiefly as the butt of a Jewish joke.

To most American Jews, Philip Roth and his concerns must seem dated, quaint, irrelevant.

(Meravi 1993: 26)

As early as 1979, Roth seems to have sensed the truth of Meravi's observation, observing that "I don't know about my readers now. I'm not sure who they are" (Roth 1992: 111).
WORKS CITED

All quotations from Bellow, Roth and Heller are from the first English editions, unless otherwise stated (where the date of publication differs from the first American editions, this has been indicated). All quotations from Shakespeare are taken from the Riverside edition; all biblical quotations are taken from the King James Authorised Version. Unless otherwise specified, the place of publication for all texts is London.

Works by Bellow, Roth & Heller


¹ This edition has been used because of the difficulty of obtaining (and retaining) a copy of the English first edition (published by Jonathan Cape in 1969).
**Other Works**


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