"PROGRESSION OF READERLY ENGAGEMENT"[1] IN *THE COUNTERLIFE* BY PHILIP ROTH

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Abstract: *Philip Roth's novel is an invitation to a very dynamic reading experience engaging the readers' emotions, judgement, but most of all, intellect. The progression of* The Counterlife *offers the authorial audience numerous jolts into questioning, being mainly generated through tensions between the narrator and his audience. When it comes to the story line, there is too much ambiguity arising out of contradictory information. Moreover, the narrator never fully articulates a final and clear vision of his world and frustrates all readers' expectations of a clear configuration of the text. The consequence of all these rhetorical choices is the fact that the audience is led to a wonderfully complicated consciousness of their own reading activity and they need to perform post-reading interpretative operations to restore balance and preserve the mimetic illusion by finding a plausible, naturalistic rationale for the narration.*

Keywords*: the rhetorical approach to narrative, progression, Nathan Zuckerman, fiction about fiction, the mimetic illusion*

The Counterlife (1986) is the fourth full novel and the fifth text to feature the fictional novelist Nathan Zuckerman. For the first time in this sequence of books (actually in Roth's career) his readers are subjected to the reading experience of a text which does not accommodate a unified story but a story cycle featuring two protagonists, Nathan Zuckerman and his brother Henry, several significant characters: Henry's wife Carol, Henry's Maria and Wendy, Nathan's Maria, and many other minor characters, but no less impressive. *The Counterlife* is a tale told in five sections – "Basel", "Judea", "Aloft", "Gloucestershire" and "Christendom". It explores the potential fates of Henry and Nathan Zuckerman and effects a remarkable change of direction in the series,

[1] James Phelan's phrase in *Narrative as Rhetoric: Technique, Audiences, Ethics, Ideology* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1996), 89.

being more radical, more profound and more puzzling than anything Roth published before.

Progression

All five sections bearing names of places look back to repetitive and alternative events which supposedly happened in 1978. An overload of events preceding the ones which constitute the actual time of the stories are also described in order to create the necessary explanatory background. The novel has a very complicated dynamic. While in chapter 1 the narrative progresses smoothly mainly by the introduction and relief of cognitive tension between the narrator and the narrative audience, chapters 2 and 4 open by offering audience severe jolts without eventually giving the compensatory explanation. They progress by means of both tension and instability. Chapters 2 and 5 progress mainly by instability.

Chapter 1. "Basel"

The events unfold over the course of one day at the end of September 1978, the day of, audience will find out soon enough, Henry Zuckerman's funeral. The novel opens with ten pages written in Italics in the first person and which will turn out to be an entry in Zuckerman's journal about his younger brother Henry. Thus, the audience is informed about the events that went on before Henry's death. With this first chapter, it seems that Zuckerman takes on the task to tie a loose end from *Zuckerman Unbound* and *The Anatomy Lesson:* the depiction of the torment of Henry Zuckerman, his brother, a successful dentist, the tallest and most handsome of all the Zuckerman men. In the second volume of series the audience was told that because of Henry's kindly, gentle, and doctorly manner, all of his patients fall in love with him, and he falls in love with his patients. Moreover (but less important this time), Henry accused Nathan of killing his father with his best-selling book (references to this in the second and the third installment).

At the time of his passing, Henry was a forty-year-old dentist in New Jersey with a wife and three children. He was a tall man, with an athletic physique and dark good looks and he used to be very shy. Unlike Nathan, Henry had opted for a traditional profession – dentistry- and a traditional family. Exhausted by the marriage, he had had four affairs over the course of ten years, the first being with Maria from Basel.

Though Henry and Maria had been very much in love, they eventually chose to focus on their marriages, and months later Maria returned to her husband, to Switzerland, and to oblivion. His last affair was with his dental assistant, Wendy. However, when at the age of 39, Henry was diagnosed with a heart condition, he also became sexually impotent as a side-effect of the medication meant to save his life. Despite his doctor's urge to continue with the medication and accept a life without sex and his fear that he might "leave his children fatherless", Henry chose bypass surgery, in order to recover sexual function and resume his sexual affair with Wendy. His operation failed and he died on the operating table. This introduction to the novel contains the first reference to the central issue of the whole narrative: "the desire to live differently" (*CL*[2] 45), the urge to change his life. Henry's affairs had been nothing else but a diversion from being a "dutiful father, husband, and son" (*CL* 15), while his heart ailment, a consequence of his failure "to find the ruthlessness to take what he wanted [a new life with his new love Maria] instead of capitulating to what he *should* [my emphasis] do" (idem)

Shortly before his death and after serious hesitation, because the Zuckerman brothers had been feuding in the years since their parents had died, Henry sought reconciliation with Nathan and asked his advice. The feud hints at another important theme of the novel: the tension between literature and life, i.e. the toll writing literature takes on the writer's relationships. People grow apart because of feeling unfairly depicted, "[…] exploiting and distorting family secrets was my brother's livelihood" (*CL* 14) thought Henry of Nathan, or for fear of providing writers with material to put in books of fiction.

The typography style changes (i.e. the text drops the italic font and continues in roman font) and a non-character narrator informs the audience that the previous pages trying to reconstitute the events that put Henry in the coffin, have been written by Zuckerman (another of Nathan's "useful fictions") in place of the eulogy Carol invited him to deliver at the funeral. It was impossible the night before for Nathan to write the eulogy, because "the narrative began to burn a whole in Zuckerman's pocket" (*CL* 17), just as it is impossible for him to feel grief: "He was now going to have a very hard time getting through the day

[2] All quotations of the primary source have been extracted from Philip Roth, *The Counterlife* (Vintage, 2005).

without seeing everything that happened as *more,* a continuation not of life but of his work or work-to-be. […] Entering the synagogue with Carol and the kids, he thought: 'This profession even fucks up grief'" (*CL* 17-8).

While this piece of information continues to reduce cognitive tension it also points out to another important theme in the novel which is an echo of previous books featuring Nathan Zuckerman: life is a continuation of art, just as art is a continuation of life. The boundaries between the two are blurred. This information contributes to character depiction, as well: Zuckerman suffers from a compulsive drive to turn life into literature, particularly engaging being "morally inappropriate" events. He creates literature in written form, but also in his head.

Zuckerman is confronted with an inner conflict. A conflict mentioned will always represent a new instability in a story, therefore, at this point the narrator introduces the first instability of the chapter: What will Nathan do with the text he has been so ardently writing? He asks himself several times: "But what about the three thousand words? The trouble was that words that were morally inappropriate for a funeral were just the sort of words that engaged him." (*CL* 17) or "What *was* he to do with those three thousand words? Betray his brother's final confidence, strike a blow against the family of the very sort that had alienated him from them in the first place?" (*CL* 26) His questions points to an ethical conflict, which complicates the mimetic unfolding of the book and makes Zuckerman's thematic component even more complex: he comes to represent the writer torn between his responsibilities towards his material versus towards his society, i.e. the powers and responsibilities that "great talent" brings, a matter of the ethics of writing. This instability is closely connected to the second one introduced a little later in the text. The resolution of one will provide resolution to the other.

During the description of the funeral and the mourners' reunion at Henry's, Nathan is depicted as continuing his "piecing Henry's story together from the little he knew" (*CL* 17), which included Henry's confessions about his life, illness and mistresses made during his several recent visits, and the diligent notes - "dozens of shortish entries about Henry and Maria and Carol" (*CL* 26) - the writer put down in his notebooks 10 years before during his brother's affair with his Swiss patient, Maria. His torment is accompanied by his speculations about

Henry's expectations from him. Eventually the "live fiction" that was going on in his head throughout that day provides him with an answer and triggers his feeling of guilt for not having prevented Henry from having the dangerous operation. Zuckerman concern with his brother's misfortune leads him to wonder: "What if instead of the brother whose obverse existence mine inferred – and who himself unwittingly inferred me – *I* had been the Zuckerman boy in that agony?" (*CL* 46). This foretell what is to come in chapter 4. Moreover, a colleague of Henry's who had tried to interest him in cryonics, makes another premonitory observation, while trying to convince Nathan, this time, to invest in the freezing business: "Maybe you will too [find cryonics appealing] if you ever find yourself in Henry's shoes. […] I said 'if'? Pardon my delicacy. I meant when." (*CL* 50)

During his rumination about the circumstances of his brother's illness and unexpected death, Zuckerman also wonders whether Carol has known about his affairs and this announces the second instability the narrator introduces in this section of the book. "If Carol had ever had any mystery for her brother-in-law […] he had never been able to figure out precisely how naïve she was […] the story Carol had chosen to tell wasn't the one he had pieced together (and had decided for now to keep to himself) […] Hers was the story that was intended to stand as the officially authorized version, and he wondered while she recounted it if she believed it herself". (*CL* 28-9)

Before leaving, while Zuckerman is saying good-bye to Carol he has another of his numerous flights of fancy and enacts in his mind a conversation in which Carol confesses her knowing about Henry's infidelity and about his real reason to undergo surgery. This dialogue parallels the real dialogue:

It was, for both of them, such a strongly emotional moment, that Zuckerman wondered if he wasn't about to hear her say, "I know about her Nathan. I've known all along […]"

But in Zuckerman's arms, pressing herself up against his chest, all she said, in a breaking voice, was: "It helped me enormously, your being here."

Consequently he had no reason to reply, "So that's why you made up that story," but said nothing more than what was called for. "It helped *me*, being with you all." (*CL* 51)

Nathan's conjecture upon leaving was that she either has never known or that she has found out but preferred to re-write their life story, describing in her eulogy a decent domestic life with Henry, which would make her "a more interesting woman" (*CL* 52). The resolution to this instability comes in the last paragraphs of the chapter when Zuckerman discovers among the entries in his journal an incident Henry recounted as the moment which overturned his consolation that if he had had to face the crushing loss of Maria's love, "at least he had never been discovered" (idem). Carol seems to have known all along, which changes the inner conflict of Zuckerman: writing a book about Henry would not mean so much betraying his brother's confidence as exposing Carol's domestic fiction. Instead of being given a resolution, this first instability is made even more complicated before the chapter ends.

This movement of Chapter I establishes the overarching thematic background (the tension between literature and life: artistic truthfulness versus conventional decency) and consequently gives thematic prominence to certain of Zuckerman's attributes, even as the implied author's handling of the narration technique designs the trajectory of the main action around our mimetic interest in Zuckerman and his struggle.

Chapter 2. "Judea"

The events in this chapter unfold over the course of three days: 9-11 December 1978 (two weeks before Christmas, during the eight-day Jewish Chanukah). Nathan 45 is taking his second visit to Israel. The first jolt the audience experiences here is the shift in narrative point of view: Nathan is the first-person narrator of the chapter. This new device in the novel must necessarily convey a design but that is not yet comprehensible. The progression based on cognitive tension runs smoothly. Once in Tel Aviv, Nathan calls his friend Shuki Elchanan, a journalist and university lecturer he has known since his first visit to Israel twenty years ago, this visit the narrator describes is also meant to reduce cognitive tension.

A blank line in the text divides Zuckerman's Israel memories of people and conversations from twenty years ago from the account of the circumstances of his brother's moving and currently living in Israel. The audience learns that Henry had undertaken heart surgery which was followed by a severe depression. A trip to Israel, eight months after his operation, was instrumental in Henry's decision to give up his dentistry

practice and move to Judea. For five months he has been living in Judea, in a militant Zionist kibbutz on the West Bank. At this point in the novel tension between the audience and the character narrator soars. After the initial shock and with the help of the details given, the audience comes to understand the design which belongs to the implied author. The import of the book's title also becomes clear. On the one hand, the implied author creates counterlives for his character (Henry Zuckerman). He has picked a problematic issue (impotence associated with coronary condition in a sensitive, successful, adulterous but also family devoted man of 40) and has chosen to visualize two outcomes. The first (depicted in chapter one) was death as a result of surgery, the second is depression followed by the decision to change his life radically (after recovering physically from heart surgery). As a result, he fashions *an escape* to Judea which implies giving up profession, success, abundance, family, mistress, country. This is the major theme of the novel. On the other hand, at this point of progression, the title of the novel also points to characters' choices to fabricate counterlives for themselves, i.e. Nathan's brother traded dentistry and domesticity for Israel and thus invented a counter-Henry. He calls himself Hanoch and has become a follower of Mordecai Lippman, an Israeli extremist. Actually, the theme of re-inventing oneself appears here for the second time in the novel, only that this time the changes a character has performed in order to accommodate his desire are radical.

The whole manner of narration here establishes a slight tension between the implied author and the authorial audience. This audience, who knows, recognizes, and wonders why. As the narrator directs attention to the scene before him, this tension remains in the background, something that needs to be resolved eventually, something that could be drawn upon later, but nothing that needs to be resolved—or even complicated—immediately.

Another blank space between lines lets audience know narrative switched back to the real time and Nathan recounts his encounter with his good friend Shuki Elchanan. Since the 1960, when Zuckerman met him, Shuki has lost his hearing in one ear, sight in one eye and his brother, a successful architect, during the Yom Kippur War. He is now a "disheartened Shuki" (*CL* 267), therefore, he wants Israel to sign a peace treaty with the Arabs and believes that Mordecai Lippman is a gangster. Knowing that Nathan uses his own life and experiences as material for

books, he warns Nathan not to become wrapped up in Lippman's comic possibilities and write about him, because that would help Lippman spread his ideas. The discourse of this very agreeable man offers the implied narrator the opportunity to present the moderate side of Israel's political ideology. The conversation also reveals radical changes in Nathan's life (another character who has re-invented himself and is living a counterlife): currently Nathan is married to Maria, an Englishwoman, pregnant with his child, and an aspiring writer, and has moved to London. (A dinner party they went to in London reveals the anti-semitic and anti-Israel attitude of the people in England.)

In order to be closer to his brother Nathan goes to Jerusalem that very evening. A flashback related to the conversation he has had with Henry's wife offers the opportunity to introduce Nathan's purpose to go to Israel and the chapter's only instability. Audiences learn that Nathan has come to Israel at the request of Carol who wants him to convince Henry to return home, but there were also his "filial duty" (*CL* 84) and brotherly duty, as well as his curiosity (the sort of curiosity writers feel related to their subject) about and the need to understand Henry's "swift and simple conversion" (ibidem), on the other. Henry's original choice for a counterlife raised his writerly interest and, therefore, needed professional inquiring.

That night, Nathan makes a trip to the Wailing Wall, which brings forward Nathan's lack of religious feelings. There he is accosted by a young American pilgrim, Jimmy Ben-Joseph Lustig of West Orange, New Jersey, who is a reader of his books and a would-be writer having already authored (but not published) *The Five Books of Jimmy*. A baseball fan to boot, he laments, "That's the thing that's missing here. How can there be Jews without base-ball? ... Not until there is baseball in Israel will the Messiah come! Nathan, I want to play center field for the Jerusalem Giants!" (*CL* 100). The question authorial audience raises here is why does Zuckerman "the author" create Jimmy Ben-Joseph? This character is a both a greatly exaggerated version of some of Zuckerman's attributes and his antagonist.

The next day Nathan goes to visit Henry to his settlement, Agor. He spends a whole day and a night there. At first, he finds himself under siege from Henry's colleagues for his "Diaspora abnormality" (four Gentile wives) and for his failure to make his own aliyah. Then he goes with Henry (who packs a revolver to defend himself) to Arab Hebron for

lunch. Next, in the evening he is invited to meet Mordecai Lippman, an apocalyptic Zionist and pioneer of the settlement movement in Judea and Samaria, at the feet of whom his brother is sitting. Mordecai Lippman is an ardent Israeli settler. He has wideset eyes and a smished nose, and his leg was mangled in the 1967 Six-Day War. He has white hair even though he is not much older than fifty. As Zuckerman is to find out during dinner, Lippman hates Shuki Elchanan for pandering to the ideas of Westerners and believes that Jews should never give ground. He thinks there will be a purging of Jews in America. He advances several apocalyptic scenarios that are vivid and cinematic and charged with the elements of powerful, if primitive, art. Among his prophecies is one of a coming pogrom in America carried out by blacks, whom the Gentiles are quietly grooming to wipe out the Jews. Lippman is a gifted storyteller, like Zuckerman himself, with a flair for making implausible dramatizations sound like imminent catastrophes, and Zuckerman, who has an appreciation for what the imagination does, comes to appreciate him, without ever falling under his spell.

Later that evening, confronted on his radical decision to abandon his life in America, move to the religious homeland and take up the doctrine of Zionism in Judea, Henry vehemently replies that his life in New Jersey smothered his Jewish identity: "Hellenized-hedonized-egomaniazed. My whole existence was the sickness. I got off easy with just my heart. Diseased with self-distortion, self-contortion, diseased with self-disguise – up to my eyeballs in meaninglessness" (*CL* 115).

When Henry declares that he is determined to remake himself a new man in Judea, the theme of the novel is restated and the instability of the chapter is given solution: Nathan has failed to persuade him to go back to his family and obviously is to return empty-handed, which the next section of the book confirms. This ends a very complex and informative chapter, as Roth, among others has chosen to tackle the Israeli-Arab matter from different perspectives. Progression in this chapter highlights the intertwining of the renewal theme with the Jewish theme.

Chapter 3. "Aloft"

After the jolt offered by the incoherence between section one and two, the audience will immediately recognize the events unfolding in this chapter as continuing smoothly from the ones described the previous chapter. The audience's interest is maintained by relieving cognitive

tension. It is the day in December 1078 when Nathan leaves by plane to go back to his new family in London.
While aloft, Nathan remembers the phone call he gave Carol the night before to tell her about her husband's refusal to return, contemplates his eventful visit to Israel, writes Henry a reconciliatory letter, reads Shuki's letter and tries to answer it. But then he finds himself in major trouble because he accidentally ended up sitting next to his fan Jimmy Ben-Joseph Lustig from West Orange, New Jersey, who has pursued by the young Jewish man in awe of his books, then tells Nathan that he intends to hijack the plane and shows him a gun, a grenade and a note ("Forget Remembering") demanding closure of Jerusalem's Holocaust memorial and urging Jews to live for the present. Israeli security officers attack, strip, search and beat the young man in the first-class cabin, but they also detain Nathan as a suspected accomplice. Thus Nathan too, for sitting next to him, is forcibly undressed, given an anal search, and then lectured on Jews, Gentiles, Satan, Billy Budd, T. S. Eliot, Eliot's "Bleistein with a cigar", the Jewish id etc. by a security guard – all these before the plane lands back in Tel Aviv.
The entire chapter is but a combination of tragedy and farce (the author's stock-in-trade from the start), with generalizations and philosophical insights which hit right on the theme of renewal: "Zionism, as I understand it, originated not only in the deep Jewish dream of escaping the danger of insularity and the cruelties of social injustice and persecution but out of a highly conscious desire to be divested of virtually everything that had come to seem, to the Zionists as much as to the Christian Europeans, distinctively Jewish behavior --- to reverse the very form of Jewish existence. The construction of a counterlife that is one's own anti-myth was at its very core. It was a species of fabulous utopianism, a manifesto for human transformation..." (*CL* 151).

Chapter 4. "Gloucestershire"
It is a chapter divided into three section. It is 1978.
The first one is a first person account made in the present tense by Nathan Zuckerman. The tense foregrounds its artifice. The events sound like being recounted the way people recount the plot of a film, play or a book. The first paragraph makes it clear that the narrator is impotent as a result of cardiac drugs, the same condition ascribed to Henry in

chapter 1. Moreover, after he has come to terms with his condition, Nathan meets "a temptress" and starts having the same sense of loss and despair Henry displayed in the previous chapters. Shockingly, while contrasting his circumstances to Henry's in the chapter titled "Basel", the narrator announces his death: "If the uxorious husband and devoted paterfamilias [i.e. Henry] dies for clandestine erotic favor, then I shall turn the moral tables: *I die* for family life, for fatherhood" (*CL* 186 emphases mine). An idea reinforced on the next page: "[…] a Maria I love more each time we meet to speak, until at last the end is ordained and I go to meet my brother's fate" (*CL* 187).

The narrator explains that when he had finally accommodated with his condition, he met Maria, a tall, charming, twenty-seven-year-old Englishwoman from Gloucestershire who moves into his building in New York City with her husband (the political aide to the British ambassador at the United Nations) and small daughter, Phoebe. Soon, they are engaged in an affair of sorts, with him giving her sexual satisfaction. He says that he loves her and wants to have a child with her but she says that he desires this only because it is impossible to achieve. He has turned down the chance to have children with his three former wives, all shiksas, like Maria. Nathan's desire to start a family with her is his re-invention of his life. The narrative audience recognizes here yet again the theme of self-invention, the character's urge to create a counterlife to the one he has. This time the theme is complicated by its fusion with another one: writing literature being incompatible with experiencing life, with living, as it implies "solitude and silent work" (*CL* 193) (an echo of the major theme in *The Anatomy Lesson).*

"I no longer want to spend it [my life] just writing. There was a time when everything seemed subordinate to making up stories. When I was younger I thought it was a disgrace for a writer to care about anything else. Well, since then I've come to admire conventional life much more and wouldn't mind getting besmirched by a little. As it is, I feel I've practically written myself *out* [emphasis in the original] of life."

"And now you want to write yourself back in? […]" (192)

Their long dialogue reveals Maria's suspicions of him: she is afraid he enjoys their affair (which, incidentally, provides her with her own counterlife "you're an escape" 201) so much because it provides him with material for another book, and forbids him to write about her:

"[…] I know you're not to be trusted. *Are* you writing a book?"

"Yes, it's all for a book, even the disease." [double meaning]
"I half believe that. You're not at any rate to write about me. Notes are okay, because I know I can't stop you taking notes. But you're not to go all the way."
[…] "I can't write 'about' anyone. Even when I try it comes out someone else."
"I doubt that."
"It's true. It's one of my limitations" (*CL* 194-5)

Zuckerman and Maria turn out to have a very intellectual affair. Zuckerman could not have fallen for a girl incapable of intellectual conversation and without a high interest in literature. This confirms Henry's assumptions of Nathan's women (which in fact are Nathan's suppositions about Henry's assumptions regarding his companions, as they appear in Nathan's "useful fiction" in "Basel"): "literary groupies". As a matter of fact, Maria writes fiction herself.

Nathan's account of their affair is made up of long dialogues, in the form of investigations conducted by an inquiring Zuckerman. One of these conversations is unexpectedly broken by this remark (in which the narrator addresses his audience directly and confesses): "The transcript here, heavily abridged, omits to mention those demi-intimacies that disrupted the questioning, and the attendant despair that's transformed everything." (*CL* 201) This sentence about voluntarily suppressed narration or omission of information disrupts the mimetic illusion being a technique meant to point to the artificiality of the story as well as to the number of levels involved.

Eventually, Nathan convinces her that once he is well again they can both experience "family happiness"/ "married love" (the first is the title of a story by Tolstoy, the second the title Maria believes the story has). Therefore, he has a coronary bypass operation but dies, just like Henry did in chapter 1 and just as Nathan predicted earlier in the chapter.

A blank space divides the first section from the second, which begins with one of the most striking pieces of information: "So long as Nathan was alive, Henry couldn't write anything unself-consciously, not even a letter to a friend" (*CL* 209). This implies that the narrator of the chapters 2 and 3, as well as of the first section in this chapter, has died and that this section is now narrated by a non-character narrator taking the perspective of Henry Zuckerman. In this version of the story Nathan (now dead) has written a draft of the novel in which they are all

characters. Henry finds the manuscript of Nathan's latest novel after his brother's cremation, and he censors it by destroying part of it as well as pages out of Nathan's private journal so that no one will suspect him of being an adulterer. The manuscript used to be a novel in progress - *The Counterlife*, which *apparently* sheds light of the narrative strategy of the book. The authorial and narrative audience are led to believe that the events of the second section of chapter 4 are background to earlier chapters. But then again how are narrative and authorial audiences to account for sections 1 and 3 of "Gloucestershire"? If what we read in chapter one, two, three and five are the chapters of a manuscript by Nathan Zuckerman, and if this is revealed by a non-character narrator in the middle of chapter 4, what is the explanation for section one of this chapter, which was written in the first person by the Nathan before his tragic death (and has no connection to the story narrated in the previous chapters) and for section three, which is an interview the "ghost" of Nathan takes Maria. What is their purpose in the dynamic of *The Counterlife?*

To the narrative audience's surprise death does not prevent Nathan from interviewing Maria from beyond the grave, nor Maria from answering him as if it were the most natural thing in the world to talk to a ghost. The audience finds out through their dialogue that she has been to his apartment one last time and has read the final chapter of his novel in progress (Henry already having destroyed some earlier chapters). She claims that he distorted all the characters except her daughter, Phoebe. Maria leaves the chapter intact, even though she is identifiable in it and it mentions their affair. She detests the women in history who destroyed great writers' letters and memoirs, and she thinks that the book perhaps will be her salvation by leading to a divorce.

Chapter 5 "Christendom"

The events in this chapter unfold over the course of one day, 11 December 1978, the day of Nathan's return from Israel and Maria's birthday (she turns 28). This time the audience knows exactly what they are to expect from this chapter: a fictionalized series of events, i.e. the events Nathan depicted in the last chapter of his novel-in-progress at the time of his death. The events in the chapter are subsequent to the ones described in chapter 2, "Judea", but they totally deny the hijacking incident in "Aloft" (Nathan arrived in London with "the notes […]

amassed on the *quiet* flight up from Israel" 259 – emphasis mine; actually, Maria's letter at the end of the chapter reveals Nathan's "grandiously amusing [him]self on the plane up from Israel by staging a lunatic hijack attempt" *CL* 317) and, though they have as background Nathan and Maria's affair in New York City while she was married, they do not seem to be the continuation of Nathan's life after successful heart surgery (no heart affliction or impotence is mentioned whatsoever). The chapter offers yet another counterlife for Nathan in London (actually it expands on the counterlife already mentioned in "Judea"), the life of a happy family guy, though under constant anti-Semitic attack.

The chapter features a 45-year-old Nathan married to Maria, an English girl of 28, five-months pregnant with his child. They have been married for four months and had to move to England because Maria's former husband threatened to sue for custody of his daughter, Phoebe, if he was not allowed to exercise visitation rights conveniently. In this scenario we find a Zuckerman set to lead the life of domestic tranquility. At Chiswick, in a house overlooking the Thames, he plans to live like the river: "[…] on and on, amiably, amicably, aimlessly" (*CL* 267). He leads a life of contentment and serenity and he seems willing to make peace with his alienated, dead father: "[t]hrough fatherhood he believes he can be rescued" (Singh 109)

However, in his process of reducing cognitive tension between him and the narrative audience, the narrator also points to a number of "incongruities" (age, cultural background, religious affiliation) which seem to threaten the tranquil life, and recounts several incidents which really test the limits of their marital reunion. All these facilitate the introduction of the major instability of the chapter: Will Nathan and Maria continue to be together? Firstly, there is Nathan's church visit. "Fresh from [his] Sabbath at Agor" (*CL* 263) Nathan accompanies Maria to a religious service in a Christian Church in London. This obligation to witness the Christian carol service, makes him feel "shut out" and overwhelmed by a "natural and thoroughgoing incompatibility": "I'm never more of a Jew than I am in a church when the organ begins" (*CL* 260). Secondly, there is Sarah's (his wife's sisters's) accusation - "I think you are leading an impostor's life" (*CL* 281), for he is "bedding women of a superior social class" (*CL* 282) followed by her warning that their mother is "terribly anti-Semitic" (idem). Thirdly, there is an incident in the restaurant where the couple is celebrating Maria's birthday and an

elderly English woman accuses him of "stinking up the place" (*CL* 312), which betrays a latent but pervasive feeling of anti-Semitism in England. Finally, Zuckerman is let down by Maria's admission to having concealed the truth about the anti-Semitism of her mother and England's society and her refusal to have their son circumcised, which to Zuckerman, Wisse explains, means "claim[ing] the child as an unambiguous Jew" (318), as circumcision is a mark of difference. Later on Zuckerman states: "Circumcision is everything that the pastoral is not […] reinforces what the world is about, which isn't strifeless unity." (*CL* 327) "He realizes that being Zuckerman is one long performance […] In his earnestness to change his life, he didn't even recognized that being earnest was an act. For a self aware person like him being an impostor for long was not possible"[3] The consequnce of all these is Nathan's crisis identity which triggers the crisis in his marital relationship. The result is that the domestic idyll is aborted midway. He admits that he married Maria because he wanted to break away from his old life and his own examination of it. His conversation with Sarah made him realized the mistake he had made by allowing himself to be "beguiled mostly by fantasy, […] everything up until now had been largely a dream in which [he] had served as a mindless co-conspirator, spinning a superficial unreality out of those 'charming' differences that had at last broken upon [them] with their full – if fossilized- social meaning." (*CL* 287)

After arguing with Maria about anti-Semitism and Jewish identity, he realizes that living in England with her has made him more of a Jew: "The unpredictable development was how furious it all made me. But then I had been wholly unprepared – usually it was the Semites, and not the anti-Semites, who assaulted me for being the Jew I was" (*CL* 283).

At midnight, Nathan leaves the house and hails a taxi, to take him to Cheswick, to the unfinished house on the river. There he wanders around and sits on the French windows sill, trying to recollect the past fourteen months with their obstacles, and eventually feels "ridiculous" for being "so easily overwhelmed" and for letting the past destabilize their marriage. Then he decides to go home, but the fear of not finding her there anymore insinuates itself and Zuckerman starts composing in his mind the letter she might have left and his own reply to it. Despite

[3] Nandita Singh, *Philip Roth: A Novelist in Crisis* (New Delhi: Classical Publishing Co, 2001), 109.

the imperious urge to go back home to Maria, "his connection to a full and outer existence" (316), there is no piece of information in the last pages of the chapter that Zuckerman returns to his domestic life.

Ending with the two imagined letters and no reference to Nathan's next action entails a lack of mimetic closure, which is a bit frustrating to the reader, but on a closer examination the slight mimetic disappointment is compensated by the fact that the two letters contain the narrator's/author's best thoughts – his aesthetic, moral, philosophical and epistemological points, congruent not only with the events of the chapter which includes them, but also with the entire novel. Once again Zuckerman/Roth makes maximum use of the bundling convention Rabinowitz calls the rule of conclusive endings.

Maria's letter draws attention to a number of mimetic, thematic and aesthetic issues. Firstly, she recognizes herself as a character in the book (as having been "extracted" from "upstairs" for artistic purposes) and her decision is therefore to leave him *and* his book. Curiously, she writes the letter from the perspective of the woman who lives in Zuckerman building in New York, not from that of a lover or a wife. Secondly, Maria points to his attraction, as a writer, to lost causes, to the "irresolvable conflict" (*CL* 317): in New York there was the "horror" of his illness, his impotence and even his death, while in England, "the anti-Semitic outburst". Thirdly, the letter highlights her conception of literature (she writes stories about "the mists, the meadows", stories born out of "the amiable drift", out of tranquility and the desire to avoid the negative consequences of writing), as opposed to his (his topic is always the collision, the clash, the antipastoral; hence, his permanent fight against Jews, fathers, "literary inquisitors", and, currently, anti-Semites). Lastly, she calls attention to his newly discovered urge to proclaim his ethnic identity ("in England being Jewish turns out to be difficult […] You *revel* in restrictions" *CL* 320).

Nathan's letter serves to answer all these ethical accusations of imposture (artistic or otherwise), of psychosemitic attitude, of using people as characters in his books, and of antipastoralization. It is obvious that he conceives of life as if it were literature, he refers to it in terms specific to theater acting (impersonation). Self, if it exists, believes Zuckerman, is very limited. Everybody is nothing but a performer enacting the role that others demand of him/her, therefore the essence of life is impersonation. As far as his taste for conflict and contradiction is

concerned, he reveals his deep belief that pastorals or "idyllic scenarios" of "sanitized, confusionless" lives do not exist except in imagination: "In dead seriousness, we all create imagined worlds, often green and breastlike, where we may finally be 'ourselves' " (*CL* 326)

As for his Jewish identity, Zuckerman does acknowledge it but admits it is highly individualized. He is "[a] Jew without Jews, without Judaism, without Zionism, without Jewishness, without a temple or an army or even a pistol, a Jew clearly with one home, just the object itself, like a glass or an apple" (*CL* 328). Circumcision is a clear mark of Jewish identity. Zuckerman defines circumcision as the antidote to the charming inventiveness the author/he has been practicing. "The heavy hand of human values falls upon you right at the start, making your genitals as its own. Inasmuch as one invents one's meanings, along with impersonating one's selves, this is the meaning I propose for the rite." (*CL* 327) The final image of the text (his circumcised erection) is meant to reinforce his ideas about the cultural difference and the impossibility of a pastoral, whereas the last sentence is meant to remind Maria that for characters there is no escape, the only life they have is the fictionalized one. While trying to preserve the mimetic illusion by labeling the two letters as imagined, the author really needed them in order to put a lid on complex novel.

Conclusion

What can one infer from the findings of the above close reading of the book? The progression of *The Counterlife* clearly could not be further from the traditional plot progression with a beginning, a middle and an end, i.e. from a storyline with set up, new situation, complication, climax and resolution. The five sections of the novel each contradict each other to some extent, thus certain events that take place in one section are presupposed not to have taken place in subsequent sections and the expectations aroused regarding configuration are completely frustrated. Because this is a novel which flagrantly defies what has come before, and not only once, the effect is what Rabinowitz calls "jolting the authorial audience into questioning."[4] In order to make sense of the sequence of events and to preserve the mimetic illusion (responsible for

[4] Peter J. Rabinowitz, *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 162.

the reader's emotional attachment to the story), it is necessary for the authorial audience to revise their understanding of the entire structure of the novel, so that the ending (a false one) will eventually appear prefigured, and also to "'thematiz[e]' the jolt, so that it becomes the very subject of the text."[5] James Phelan, too, notices that the lack of a full mimetic function in any narrative invites broader thematic generalizations[6].Therefore, the interpretive operation that restores balance is a shift in authorial audience's perception of *The Counterlife* as a complex multi-layered book with a strong thematic component.

Thus, this should not be viewed not a novel about a character or two - it is a novel about writing literature – fiction about fiction. The only rational explanation for the progression is that there is a narrator, ghostwriting the book: the writer, Nathan Zuckerman. Nathan Zuckerman the writer demonstrates what a writer can make of other people's lives and how literature interferes with life. As he is in total control of these fictionalized events, he writes this new novel *The Counterlife* (he has been the "author"-narrator of other texts in the series till *The Counterlife*) in a very playful and experimental mode, cleverly playing off the traditional expectation of his audience for realistic narrative paradigms and showing an obsessive concern with his vocation. In *The Counterlife,* he offers four different histories, that is, the text proffers a series of variations on the same theme: the re-invention of oneself, the choice of a counterlife. Zuckerman does not "allow one perspective to gain interpretative privilege over another."[7] All four stories have been inventions of the writer Nathan Zuckerman. None of them depicts the "reality" of Nathan Zuckerman, they are all the outcome of his imagination.

As for the accusation of the novel's lack of clear resolution of the problems posed, many having stated that the five movements are a kind of a circuit, I would contend that all main questions asked have definitely been answered, i.e., the impotence of both Nathan and Henry which triggered the need for an escape is dealt with in various ways and a variety of outcomes are envisaged in connection with it. Moreover, the

[5] Idem.

[6] James Phelan, *Reading People, Reading Plots: Character, Progression, and the Interpretation of Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 80.

[7] Debra Shostak, *Philip Roth: Countertexts, Counterlives* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 6.

same issue is complicated in both characters' cases with their renewed awareness of their Jewish identity. This is why Shechner remarks that it is "a book so calibrated and nuanced."[8] Many critics and reviewers notice there is a perfect parallelism: both brothers die while undergoing surgery, both re-create their life as a result of surviving heart surgery, both re-assess their relation to Jewishness, both refuse to give a eulogy at their brother's funeral, both have their love affair which forces them to take risks in order to restore their potency, however in light of the way these two brothers are built their destinies take different directions. What is more, if readers understand that this new book by Nathan Zuckerman has to be read as a comment on the craft of writing, and choose to see it metaphorically as a puppet show with four different acts casting the same characters to show them living counterlives, then this work of fiction achieves coherence.

To end here, I would like to quote the verdict of Mark Shechner regarding this novel "Roth is up to something major in *The Counterlife* that makes it seem a more auspicious novel."[9] The greatness of this novel is directly connected to Roth's artistic method, the richness of themes and the challenging reading experience readers are subjected to.

[8] Mark Shechner, "Zuckerman's Travels," *American Literary History,* Vol. 1, No. 1, Spring, 1989 (Oxford University Press), 222, http://www.jstor.org/ stable/489980 (accessed16 May 2008).

[9] Idem 226.