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# League of their own: the competition for Jewish-American identity in the novels of Philip Roth

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**A League of Their Own:  
The Competition for Jewish-American Identity  
In the Novels of Philip Roth**

**Rebecca Fullerton Amendola  
Honors Thesis  
2005-2006  
Elisa Narin van Court**

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“The two urges, the one toward personal happiness and the other toward union with other human beings must struggle with each other in every individual; and so, also, the two processes of individual and of cultural development must stand in hostile opposition to each other and mutually dispute the ground...It almost seems as if humanity could be most successfully united into one great whole if there were no need to trouble about the happiness of individuals...”<sup>1</sup>

—from *Civilization and Its Discontents* by Sigmund Freud

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<sup>1</sup> Freud, 99

In his insightful and sometimes troubled contemporary writings, Philip Roth demonstrates a nuanced understanding of how the development of Jewish-American identity is a painful and often hilariously paradoxical journey of discovery as Jewish traditions intersect (and often collide) with the American ideal of vertical advancement. Since the successful fulfillment of the American Dream requires some measure of assimilation into the majority American culture known as Americanization, Roth's Jewish-American characters are continually and precariously ill-balanced between retaining and abandoning their Jewish heritage in favor of a new American identity. Thus, if Americanization necessitates Anglo-conformity and the abandonment of immigrant mores, the Jewish characters who people Roth's stories and novels attempt to assimilate by replacing their own cultural identifiers with those of the majority American culture. Yet this form of cultural surrender is shown to be a conversion in the name of upward mobility; a conversion which forsakes foundational identity to engage in the formation of a new, and often inauthentic, American identity. In this sense, Roth's American Dream of personal revision and upward conversion presents an ironic quandary for the Jewish characters: to convert or not to convert? Conversion for American Jews, of course, extends far beyond ecclesiastical bread-breaking and enters into the metaphorical realm of social subtleties. The perverse conversion of Jew to American necessitates a ritualistic performance involving the adaptation of particularly American forms of competitive interplay, cuisine and language. But Roth, as authorial commentator on the Jewish 'condition,' seems to suggest, through his characters and story-lines, that to be wholly American and to be wholly Jewish actuates a perilous cultural split-personality. Accordingly, Roth presents his reader with what he conceives to be the bipolarity of



Jewish-Americans, a chronic duality afflicting every American who claims to be a Jew (and, conversely, every Jew who claims to be American). In this representation, Jewish-Americans are not only multi-faceted fractured selves, they also inhabit and participate in a divided culture. Jewish-Americans confront competing pressures: to proceed from their home and heritage and achieve success and acceptance in the larger society, and to maintain their ties to family and religio-ethnic origins. Thus, Roth presents Jewish-American characters divided by the competing prerogatives of the group and the individual.

Roth plays out the dynamics of assimilation in many different aspects of life, and especially in those where the literal is readily reconstructed as metaphor. In this thesis, I will focus on Roth's use of competition, food and language as cultural identifiers which channel the divided Jewish-American identity. These signifiers can both aid and hinder the characters; more specifically, by manipulating these cultural identifiers, Roth's characters may choose to pass, that is, attempt to penetrate the majority culture by impersonating the very culture that oppresses them. Competition, food and language help distinguish cultural difference while providing a venue through which characters may enact their passing, or as Roth seems to suggest, trespassing. By relinquishing their Jewish identity of origin and passing into the majority American culture, Roth's characters display a desire to establish a self-created identity. So, the agents of passing and personal expression, competition, food and language, are also group cultural identifiers binding the individual to the collective. Roth shows how even the successfully 'passing figures' retain the baggage of their foundational identity; in this way, Roth

exposes how the characters can not 'let go' of their origins no matter how they manipulate cultural identifiers.

Since cultural identities act as metaphors for different 'selves,' a Jewish identification represents one metaphorical self and American identification denotes another. Roth shows how the fusion of the various 'selves' results in an often comic and calamitous self-identification. Ultimately however, Roth's authorial dedication to the dilemma of self-definition versus societal definition reflects, as Mark Shechner so aptly notes, the common Jewish-American 'condition':

...the [American Jew must] struggle to negotiate the competing claims of the individual imperative—the American theme—with the group imperative—the Jewish theme...the former is the optimistic triad of individual happiness, personal freedom, and self-reliance that personifies America's official myth of itself. The other is the belief among Jews at large, a belief both naïve and profound, that Jewish writers are 'their' writers: heir to the common history, partners in the common destiny, and therefore spokesman for the common will. (Shechner 337-338)

Yet, Roth's body of work not only speaks to the Jewish-American community about whom he writes, but engages all of America, relentlessly commenting on what it is to be an American.

Roth's Fields of Dreams: Competition in *The Great American Novel*,  
*Goodbye, Columbus*, *American Pastoral*  
and *The Human Stain*

Roth develops a complex competitive American arena, showcasing the Jewish-American struggle for self-identity. Competition and the concurrent concept of winning and losing provide a venue through which Roth's characters work out their self-identity. Competition, of course, is a polyvalent term. On the one hand, Rothian competition can be quite literal. An avid sports fan, Roth consistently utilizes sport in his narratives, running his characters across athletic fields, boxing rings, in swimming pools or on baseball diamonds. Exercise on the playing field hurls marginalized characters into the American majority and stirs them to identify with their athletically-purchased American success. Additionally, characters consciously and unconsciously utilize athletic competition in order to symbolically play out personal *mêlées*. Thus, athletic competition is a vehicle by which characters pass into and penetrate the majority culture while volleying for a self-identity—it is a vehicle by which characters win or lose a self-identity.

On the other hand, Roth recognizes that to realize a Jewish-American self-identity is itself a competition, a competition against various cultures and various identifying 'selves.' Jewish-American competition takes place in a vast arena, in which individuals contest the force of their parent culture against the desired yet barricaded American culture. Simply, Rothian cultural competition takes place between the insulated Jewish identity and the idealized American Dream. The irony is that Jewish-American identity is an amalgam of all of these cultural forces—to select and identify with one culture is a

denial of another. Cultural resistance challenges the full definition of personal identities; hence, Roth's characters are engaged in a seemingly endless match between various macrocosmic, cultural forces and their own personal quest.

## I

Baseball, "one of the few subjects," Roth says, "that I know much about," is the satirical vehicle of his preposterously comic book, *The Great American Novel (RMAO 86)*. Roth's most extensive use of sport in a narrative, the novel's parody of American life takes place on a baseball diamond, a significant locale in American culture. Murray Baumgarten and Barbara Gottfried suggest that "Roth begins with the assumption that baseball is in fact the civil religion of America"; that being so, the baseball field is the blessed temple of every American, its players are deities and its fans are willing martyrs (121). One player voices the interconnectedness of religion and baseball when he apostrophizes, "'For what is a ball park, but a 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 such are the twin rocks upon which all sport is founded'" (*GAN 88-89*). Converted from the national pastime to the national religion, Rothian baseball promises redemption for all individuals (even one-armed players, cripples and midgets).

At the center of Roth's religiously elevated sports allegory are the Ruppert Mundys, "chosen to become the homeless team of baseball" (*GAN 49*). Unsurprisingly, the itinerant Mundys, whose "all-time records" document their consummate losses and errors, ape the reality of the homelessness of Jews (*GAN 174*). The genius "ungrateful [Jewish] son," Isaac Ellis, invents a secret recipe to create champions out of the hopeless

and homeless Mundys (*GAN* 299). Ellis reformulates Wheaties cereal, producing a *real* Breakfast of Champions that ““make[s] the most hopeless baseball team in history into a team of red-blooded American boys”” (*GAN* 302) Ellis’ innovation is all in the name of ““winning, *winning*—what made this country what it is today!”” (*GAN* 302) Thus, to win is to be a “red-blooded American” (*GAN* 302).

Ultimately, what is interesting about Roth’s baseball allegory is not necessarily the game itself and what it parodies, but the medium the sport provides to showcase the competitiveness of American life. The story, quite simply, is about winning and losing. The narrator’s lengthy speech on the subject encapsulates Roth’s allegorical point:

Winning! Oh, you really can’t say enough good things about it. There is nothing quite like it. Win hands down, win going away, win by a landslide, win by accident, win by a nose, win without deserving to win—you just can’t beat it, however you slice it. Winning is the tops. Winning is the be-all and end-all, and don’t let anybody tell you otherwise. All the world loves a winner...Name one good thing that losing has to recommend it. You can’t. Losing is tedious. Losing is exhausting. Losing is boring. Losing is uninteresting...Losing is universally despised, as well it should be. The sooner we get rid of losing, the happier everyone will be. But winning. To win! (*GAN* 302-303)

In the end, by eating the “Jewish Wheaties,” the Mundy’s become a winning team and “henceforth, the Mundys are the master race!” (*GAN* 374) Thus, through victory,

homeless losers become decidedly American, finally home on the American range as winners of the American Dream of success.<sup>2</sup>

## II

The clear and literal representation of athletic competition as a model for self-identifying and assimilation into American culture that we find in *The Great American Novel* is Roth's most obvious and unequivocal use of competitive sports. And while this novel is significant for its literal use of competition, I am more concerned here with less obvious, and often times figurative competitive structures within which Roth develops his themes of identity and assimilation. Roth's obsession with winning and losing appears as early as his first published novella, *Goodbye, Columbus*. In this work, Roth exercises a sophisticated profile of competition. Elements of literal athletic contest abound; however, the sports imagery works to fill out the greater theme of figurative competition. The protagonist, Neil Klugman, enters a cultural rat race *about* race, class and gender. Though he is of the working-class in Newark, Neil pursues Brenda Patimkin, a spoiled, 'Jewish American Princess' living the luxury-life in suburban Short Hills. Neil quickly competes for Brenda's fickle affection; he, quite literally, fights an uphill battle—Short Hills is "one hundred and eighty feet...in altitude above Newark" (*Goodbye, Columbus* 8). From her geographically symbolic position atop the hill, Brenda enjoys dominance over Neil. She is sexually and socially liberated, a "figure of the fullness of American female possibility": self-determined, carelessly sensuous and controlling (Baumgarten 34). Brenda not only represents female potential, she so successfully executes power over Neil that she is masculinized. The negative stereotype of Jewish American Princess who

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<sup>2</sup> The traditional American folk song, "Home on the Range" is the Ruppert Mundys' signature tune, played as they parade through each city (GAN 138). An ironic choice for a homeless team, the song epitomizes the Mundys' desire to *be*, at last, home.

“displays an aura of entitlement...[and] require[s] everything and give[s] nothing,” certainly fits Brenda’s profile; however, the characterization is incomplete (Prell 180). She is also stereotypically masculine in her athleticism, sexual liberation and general self-assertive brawn. Certainly, Brenda’s sexual and classist weaponry armors her as a formidable opponent against diffident Neil, who, in contrast, exhibits effeminate subservience and humility.

In *The Jewish Woman in America*, Charlotte Baum, Paula Hyman and Sonya Michel point out that the

[Jewish woman] is condemned as being sexually exploitive, but probably her most offensive characteristic is her refusal to defer easily to male authority, an unforgivable sin in the American pantheon of feminine virtues. (238)

Brenda need not worry, however, for her lack of ostensible American female charm works with her distinctly Jewish father, Ben Patimkin, and her boyfriend, Neil. They are two more characters in the long history of Jewish male feminization. Thus, her “refusal to defer easily to male authority” does not pose a problem; her munificent, doting father and powerless boyfriend allow Brenda to win. In the end, however, Neil refuses the lifestyle Brenda represents by walking away from its upper-class daughter. He finally realizes he cannot win against Brenda. The story’s closing image shows that Neil, instead, ‘wins’ a self-understanding, as he sees himself in the “reflection in the glass front of the building” (GC 135).

Roth’s language and imagery of competition highlight Brenda’s association with winning and losing. The first introduction to “myopic Brenda” outlines her sexual power

as cavalier and complete: as she merely readjusts her bathing suit “back where it belonged,” Neil admits “my blood jumped” (*GC* 3). After her solo exercise in the Green Lane Country Club swimming pool, we engage with Brenda in the realm in which she fares best: the sport of competition. Brenda shows off her competitiveness on the tennis court, playing an emblematic back-and-forth relay of strength and stamina against a decided equal, Laura “Simp” Stolowitch. Brenda’s tenacious struggle to stay within the white lines of the tennis court reflects her greater cultural competition to win a ‘white’ American status. Fittingly, her opponent is also a prep-schooled WASP-wannabe, whose equivalent prowess on the court mirrors Brenda’s physical and cultural competitive actions. Proudly, Brenda’s insists on “one more game,” characteristically putting Neil on hold until she gloriously wins (*GC* 9). He admires her confident athleticism and competitiveness while recognizing that “her passion for winning a point seemed outmatched by an even stronger passion for maintaining her beauty as it was” (*GC* 10). Neil mistakes her masculine practicality for a vain desire to “[maintain] her beauty”: she “[does]n’t like to be up too close” for fear of damaging her preciously bobbed nose (*GC* 13). Symbolic of her operational character, Brenda’s rhinoplasty points to control over her body. Additionally, her operation realigns her familial nose, her Jewish nose. Still, Brenda’s practicality does not undermine her power. She immediately slips back into competition, this time with Neil, abruptly and groundlessly accusing him of being “nasty” (*GC* 13). He does not, however, return her serve and, unsurprisingly, apologizes.

Neil, albeit shortsightedly, later takes part in Brenda’s contest by pointing out that “*You* invited *me*, Brenda,” back to the country club (*GC* 17). Though Neil intends to



deflate Brenda by showing that it is she who desires him, Neil's defense ironically admits Brenda's control. Helplessly, Neil is continually subject to literal and metaphorical competition. The Patimkins exhibit an unusual obsession with sports; Neil even marvels at the twin oak trees in their backyard, which he refers to as "sporting-goods trees" for the plentiful athletic equipment strewn at its roots (*GC* 43). For this family, the competition never ends: sports make up the daily activity, Mickey Mantle is the only topic of discussion at dinner, and post-dinner basketball games occupy the evening. Once, Neil replaces Brenda's father in a game of basketball against her younger sister Julie. Mr. Patimkin himself properly describes the significance of the substitution when he encourages Neil to "'shoot...You're me'" (*GC* 28). Indeed, Neil is Mr. Patimkin, as they are both losing players in the Jewish women's game for power. Still, neither Mr. Patimkin nor Neil effectively "shoot" against the women, and on the contrary, they automatically "'let her win'" (*GC* 29). Allowing Julie to win emblemizes Neil's submission—he is not even allowed victory against the youngest Patimkin, let alone against the well-practiced muscles of Brenda.

Against the physical and cultural brawn of the Patimkins, Neil quickly weakens. After an afternoon of swim races, Neil begs "'Please, no more games'" (*GC* 53). It is all for naught, since he cannot contest Brenda's well-toned dominance; but he, instead, attempts to beat her at her own challenge (*GC* 70). Unfortunately, Neil's engagement in Brenda's competition does not rebalance the pair, for he finds utter discomfort in her contest. Neil recounts the morning Brenda decides, "'I want to run...and I want you to run'" (*GC* 70). As Brenda watches Neil race around a high school track, "Brenda called 'Hi!' and I smiled, which, as you may or may not know, makes one engaged in serious

running feel inordinately silly” (GC 71). Neil’s run around the track mimics his futile racing about Brenda. He is not chasing anything except an idealized image of himself, an image Brenda’s affluence promises. Neil feels “inordinately silly” because he recognizes the genuine absurdity of feigning happiness and ease in competition. Nonetheless, Neil clings to the potential ecstasy of triumph. When the pair makes love for the first time, Neil muses, “How can I describe loving Brenda? It was so sweet, as though I’d finally scored the 21<sup>st</sup> point” (GC 46). Here, he fully enlists competitive diction, revealing his understanding of Brenda’s competitive intercourse. Consummated by their lovemaking, Neil and Brenda confirm that their relationship is, indeed, about winning. Neil is both competing *for* her and the cultural class she represents and *against* her, fighting for balanced power in their class-differentiated, gender-inverted relationship. It is uncertain, though, whether Neil can prevail in Brenda’s Short Hills arena; for, just as at the high school racetrack, Brenda is both player and referee.

Brenda confirms her sexual lead during a challenge over birth-control. Having finally admitted that his request for the diaphragm denotes his “pleasures of the flesh,” Neil confesses his need for power, even if it is through corporal satisfaction (GC 80). But Brenda refuses to buy the diaphragm. This contest of wills between them signifies “another attempt by Neil to assert his manhood against Brenda’s domineering spirit” (Halio 19). Neil, as usual, concedes to Brenda’s preference and consents not to obtain the diaphragm; as a result of which, Brenda *does* purchase it. Before Neil knows what she has done, he is self-deprecatingly “glad that in the end she had disobeyed my desire,” however, Brenda does not even allow Neil to experience this “glad” relief—she defeats his reprieve once again: “My answer, at first, was merely that victorious look of hers, the

one she'd given Simp that night she'd beaten her, the one I'd gotten the morning I finished the third lap alone" (*GC* 101). Thus, Brenda wins this altercation in the same proud and determined manner in which she defeats her athletic opponents. As represented by the diaphragm, Brenda now wears sexual control with sinister pride; her "victorious look" emblemizes the shrewd reversal of control from their earlier contest of wills. The diaphragm no longer symbolizes Neil's right to pleasure; instead, she sports the prophylactic as confirmation of her own sexual prerogative. With the diaphragm, Brenda may now enact her own desires, as Neil charges her with accomplishing when she leaves the diaphragm at home.

Furthermore, Neil's earlier admission that he is "wooded and won on Patimkin fruit," proves his unknowing acceptance of sexual inferiority (*GC* 77). The fruit, of course, represents Brenda's sexual and cultural bounty, and recalling biblical forbidden fruit, acts as Brenda's symbol. Ironically, commodity and modern American appliances devalue Brenda's symbol of affluence and sensuality. Neil lauds, "Oh, Patimkin! Fruit grew in their refrigerator and sporting goods dropped from their trees" (*GC* 43). Just as Brenda's masculinization inverts her gender relationship with the obsequious Neil, the novel's symbols also indicate a reversal in function: "the Patimkin refrigerator is a horn of plenty, while the trees in the garden literally bear the fruit of sports equipment" (Baumgarten 25). Thus, rather than emblemizing nourishment and proliferation, Brenda's proverbial fruit has the reverse function. She, like Genesis' forbidden fruit, is tainted. Riv-Ellen Prell declares that

No matter how [the Jewish American Princesses] initially appear—adventuresome, free spirited and sexually

available—ultimately they demand that men work and give up their dreams, so that they can settle into the comforts of affluence. They are entrappers who, like mythological goddesses, set their snare with beauty and guile. (226)

So, Brenda is both the enchantress and a commodified poisoned prize; Neil can only win Brenda by losing himself.

Finally, the summer stuffed with Brenda's expression of power and Neil's subservience culminates in Brenda's crude admission that, all summer, she was "growing a penis" (*GC* 110). Not only does her "splendid punch line turn a put down into a triumphant assertion of self," Brenda confesses her masculinity (Baumgarten 40). Indeed, her mannish control overwhelms not only Gloria Feldman, to whom Brenda's rough comment is directed, but unlucky Neil as well. In contrast, Mr. Patimkin says, "Whatever my Buck wants is good enough for me"; the nickname Buck, of course, indelibly fits Brenda (*GC* 109). Though never a fawning American woman, Brenda enchants the effeminately deferential Neil who cannot fend against her bucking, overriding character. Wandering about a park filled with friendly deer, Neil muses, "What was I loving, I wondered, and since I am not one to stick scalpels into myself, I wiggled my hand in the fence and allowed a tiny-nosed buck to lick my thoughts away" (*GC* 96). Here, Neil symbolically admits his tragic weaknesses: the "tiny-nosed buck," the animal metamorphosis of our bobbed-nosed Buck, sensually "lick[s]" Neil's consciousness into oblivion (*GC* 96). As symbolized by the licking buck, Brenda, then, is both the sexual, controlling Jewish American Princess and the aggressive, powerful and persuasive American man.

Contrarily, Neil, the feminized Jewish-American who “eats like a bird,” effectually pecks at his own stigmatized effeminacy in order to indulge in Brenda’s American strength (*GC* 23). Struggling for acceptance in American society, Neil clings to Brenda’s masculine strength, for she represents the elusive American Dream. For Neil, capturing the American Dream depends on his conquest of Brenda; a loss of her denotes the loss of the Dream. Yet, even without the Dream, Neil (perhaps unknowingly) does win; he is freed from the “unrelenting demands of a woman who could never be satisfied or provide any satisfaction” (Prell 201). Ultimately, as Alan Cooper points out, “...for Neil, winning Brenda could only mean...becoming a commodity in the bargain” (45). Hence, Neil turns winning into losing: Brenda is not the true prize, but self-knowledge is. Neil’s final reflection epitomizes his whirlwind chase after Brenda:

What was it inside me that had turned pursuit and clutching  
into love, and then turned it inside out again? What was it  
that had turned winning into losing, and losing—who  
knows—into winning? I was sure I had loved Brenda,  
though standing there, I knew I couldn’t any longer. (*GC*  
135)

So, Neil’s victory is not exactly as he expected it; he collects neither Brenda as a trophy nor an expensive throne atop Short Hills. He claims, “The race is to the swift”; and Neil races away from Brenda’s unending competition just swiftly enough to find himself (*GC* 100).

### III

In *Sports and the American Jew*, Steven A. Reiss remarks that Jews were absent from sports and sports historiography because “Jews were historically stereotyped as physically weak, unfit, and intellectual, rather than athletic and brawny” (2). Since athletic brawn characterized American masculinity, Reiss asserts that

second-generation Jewish males...used sport to become acculturated and seek structural assimilation. They employed sport to gain self-esteem and public recognition from their community as well as the broader society, fight stereotypes and anti-Semitism, and escape inner city poverty. (Reiss 3)

In *American Pastoral*, Roth follows the lifelong journey of Seymour “the Swede” Levov, who enters the American mainstream through his uncharacteristic athletic skill. The Swede not only becomes the cherished hero of Weequahic, New Jersey, but, more importantly, establishes himself as American.

All of his perfected physical energy is directed toward victory, what the narrator, Nathan Zuckerman, calls “the direction of success,” the American Dream (AP 41). The American Dream is the Swede’s utopian American Pastoral by which he escapes “any predetermined notions of identity and reinvent[s] himself on his own terms” (Royal 190). But the Swede’s assimilated life in the American Pastoral is only a pretense whereby “he suppresses his horror. He learns to live behind a mask. A lifetime experiment in endurance. A performance over a ruin. Swede Levov lives a double life” (AP 81). Swede’s duality is that he sees himself as American, but does not identify with the reality

of his cultural background. The Swede's identification with America is a nationalistic identity, in which he embodies the American Dream. Because he is physically American—blond-haired, blue-eyed and athletically virile—he becomes psychologically American and equates himself to Johnny Appleseed, who “wasn't a Jew, wasn't an Irish Catholic, wasn't a Protestant Christian—nope, Johnny Appleseed was just a happy American” (*AP* 316). Of course, the Swede *is* a Jew and cannot ever be a fantastical “happy American.”

It is his daughter, ironically dubbed Merry, who combats the Swede's view of idealized Americana. As the “anarchic center of the novel...Merry grows to revile Swede's assimilated life and her place within it” (Parrish 91). Consequently, teenage Merry bombs the local general store, the formulaic hub of quaint American life, and kills a beloved local doctor. Merry's violent hatred of America devastates the Swede's understanding of his ‘darling’ country and, more importantly, himself. The Swede's brother, Jerry, rightly comments that the “‘bomb detonated [the Swede's] life’” (*AP* 69). Hence, the Swede's athleticism allows him to enter the American mainstream whereby he initially self-identifies through his successful American assimilation. However, the America he encounters is a tragic arena in which self-identity cannot depend on successful conformity. His greatest competition is the conflict between his desire for cultural assimilation into the American Pastoral and the disjointed reality of the “American berserk,” represented by his own daughter (*AP* 86).

The Swede's defeat begins early with the suppression of his Jewish identity. Zuckerman simply asks, “Where was the Jew in him?” for the Swede personifies an “unconscious oneness with America” and not with the Jewish community (*AP* 20).

Framed against the Jewish culture “whose elders, largely undereducated and overburdened, venerated academic achievement above all else,” the Swede’s athletic success separates him from his community (*AP* 3). His separation also rests with his community’s idolization of him. The Swede is glorified for his athletic prowess: since he competes on the same sporty American turf with Gentiles, he is “as close to a goy as we were going to get” and thus, not only a part of Goy America, but also a proverbial god (*AP* 10). Zuckerman recalls, “you might have told us he was Zeus,” since he is “a distinguished cut above the primordial humanity of just about everybody else at school” (*AP* 17, 5). The undisputed idol of Weequahic Jews, the Swede begins as an All-American hero with “an old American nickname, proclaimed by a gym teacher, bequeathed in a gym” (*AP* 208). Christened with an American nickname and blessed with decidedly American athleticism, the Swede’s success not only elevates him, but, through the Swede, the (Jewish) neighborhood entered into a fantasy about itself and about the world, the fantasy of sports fans everywhere: almost like Gentiles (as they imagined Gentiles), our families could forget the way things actually work and make an athletic performance the repository of all their hopes. Primarily, they could forget the war. (*AP* 3-4)

Thus, the Swede’s success engenders a false reality for his own community of origin. He is at the center of the Jewish-American imagination, but far from the community itself. The Swede’s stardom propels him further away as a “man of glamour exuding American meaning,” but lacking a foundational cultural identity (*AP* 83).



The Swede's victories on the playing field allow him to devise a new, assimilated American identity. Zuckerman astutely recognizes that "he carried [his name and success] with him like an invisible passport, all the while wandering deeper and deeper into an American's life, forthrightly evolving into a large, smooth, optimistic American" (AP 208). The Swede's "invisible passport" of athletic confidence permits him to 'pass' as wholly American. As an adult, the Swede enters into American commerce, taking over his father's glove business, which "had established itself—in no small part because of Swede Levov's athletic achievement" (AP 13). In addition, Swede marries a *shikse*, former Miss New Jersey Dawn Dwyer, rousing Zuckerman to proclaim, "He'd done it"—by marrying a Gentile, he truly assimilates and passes into American culture (AP 15). Dawn, as her name suggests, symbolizes a new cultural beginning for the Swede. Then the Swede, who "was into Quaint Americana," moves to "the prettiest spot in the world," Old Rimrock, a bucolic rural town far from his childhood slums of Newark (AP 68, 213). Swede excitedly pronounces, "We own a piece of America, Dawn. I couldn't be happier if I tried. I did it darling, I did it—I did what I set out to do!" (AP 315) What the Swede "set out to do" was to "go the limit in America" forming himself "as an ideal person who gets rid of the traditional Jewish habits and attitudes" (AP 85). Thus, the Swede becomes "post-Jewish," but the conquest of his Jewish identity oppresses him (AP 73).

When the Swede falls in love with Dawn, Zuckerman imagines that "[the Swede] lived under two skies then—the Dawn Dwyer sky and the natural sky overhead" (AP 192). Zuckerman's vision of a bifurcated Swede resonates truthfully: the Swede stands below the dual pressures of 'becoming American' by way of Dawn and the Americanized

image she engenders, and his “natural” roots. Similarly, Zuckerman remembers that the teenage Swede’s library of baseball books were “all lined up alphabetically between two solid bronze bookends that had been a bar mitzvah gift, miniaturized replicas of Rodin’s ‘The Thinker’” (AP 7). While the coming-of-age baseball books signify the Swede’s American Dream, the bookends are emblems of Jewish education, a symbol of cerebral knowledge, fittingly given at the Swede’s coming-of-age ceremony. Therefore, the Swede’s American Dream is sandwiched between the symbols of Jewish America’s educational aspirations, characterized by miniature, but no less powerful, statuettes of “The Thinker.” Ultimately, however, just as the Swede chooses Dawn and the atmosphere she represents, he also chooses the life between the bookends, the dreamy life of an American hero. His choice is devouring: the Swede’s dreams surpass his grounded ability to Think; Zuckerman tellingly acknowledges, “I had no idea where his thoughts might be or even if he had ‘thoughts’” (AP 34).

The Swede’s defeat of his Jewish identity ignites his daughter’s rage, which forces him to once again redefine his identity, a redefinition which, in turn, transforms him into a Jewish martyr to the delusional dream of American assimilation. His suppression of his Jewishness, those religio-cultural markers that would inhibit his full assimilation into the American Pastoral, drives Merry’s violent pursuit for a stable identity that her parents deny her. Yet the silently competing pressures of her Jewish and Gentile heritage stifle her ability to create a stable self-identity. Moreover, she thoroughly refuses the all-American identity that her Gentile mother represents. Rita Cohen, the woman who hides Merry after she becomes a fugitive, tells the Swede, ““You have a *shikse* wife, Swede, but you didn’t get a *shikse* daughter”” (AP 138). Even though we do not witness any

affirmations of Merry's Jewish faith or cultural recognition, the repudiation of the American identity her mother stands for is a key component of her identity crisis. Merry cannot reconcile her Jewish identity with the expectation of her *shikse* identity. Cohen notes, "We're talking about the humiliation of a daughter by her beauty-queen mother. We're talking about a mother who completely colonized her daughter's self-image" (*AP* 136).

Like an athletic penalty, Merry is the cultural consequence of stepping out of one's bounds. The Swede's assimilation into the American mainstream is a cultural transgression from his Jewish heredity. Interestingly, the hopeful belief in the Swede's athletic ability which constitutes his severance from his Jewish identity veils his offense. That is, since "our entire (Jewish) neighborhood's wartime hope seemed to converge in the marvelous body of the Swede," he does not have the perspective to understand his cultural crime (*AP* 19). His daughter, instead, recompenses for the Swede's cultural transgression. Thus, while the Swede's dazzling athletic greatness distracts him and his Jewish community from the carnage and tragedy of World War II, Merry redefines the proximity of the Vietnam War by literally bleeding her own community. "The triumphant spectacle of the Swede" perpetuates the utopian image of the American Dream and Merry, in her enraged denial of the American image, explodes the Dream (*AP* 20). Jerry Levov informs his brother that,

"She did not belong to you. She did not belong to anything you were. She did not belong to anything anyone is. *You* played ball—there was a field of play. She was not on the field of play. She was nowhere near it. Simple as that.

She was out of bounds, a freak of nature, *way* out of bounds.” (AP 71)

The “field of play” is American societal propriety and perfectionism. The Swede is ‘in’ the bounds of the “field of play” because he upholds the fantasy of American excellence (even at the expense of his own Jewish cultural boundaries). Jerry conceives that Merry’s antagonism dislocates her from the American “field of play”; however, Merry *does* contend in the American cultural arena—but she *chooses* to step out of its conformist bounds.

Before Merry’s explosion of the Swede’s American Pastoral, his self-identity rests on his winning persona: he wins both on the high school playing field and on the American field of dreams. In language of competition, Jerry recalls how the Swede’s athletic determination communicates his overall perseverance: “...Seymour just took it and took it. You could stay on this guy and stay on this guy and he’d just keep making the effort...Poor son of a bitch, that was his fate” (AP 70). In the same way, Zuckerman allegorically summarizes the Swede’s interminable effort to win on the football field:

I haven’t forgotten the Swede, after being smothered by tacklers, climbing slowly to his feet, shaking himself off, casting an upward, remonstrative glance at the darkening fall sky, sighing ruefully, and then trotting undamaged back to the huddle. When he scored, that was one kind of glory, and when he got tackled and piled on hard, and just stood up and shook it off, that was another kind of glory, even in a scrimmage. (AP 19)

Even being trounced into the field, the Swede's determined rise is victorious, for he could shake off every blow. Zuckerman tellingly remembers the Swede "half running and half limping off the field" (AP 19). This telling performance and exit from the athletic field mimics his action on the American "field of play" (AP 71). "Half-running" like a winner, the Swede surmounts the American cultural fray and assimilates victoriously.

Conversely "half-limping off the field," his seemingly triumphant assimilation injures him. The most paralyzing tackle is by his daughter, whose memory he cannot shake off: "if only he could have just let her fade away. But not even the Swede was that great" (AP 81). The Swede never "faintly reconstitute[s] the undivided oneness of existence" because he never was One (AP 206). The Swede, like any Rothian Jewish-American, is a divided one—a man competing against a dangerously divided set of cultural values and aspirations.

#### IV

Roth designs one of his most intricate portrayals of American life in his recent novel, *The Human Stain*, in which he examines the individual pursuit of self-creation against the forces of history, racism, classicism, politics and gender divides. But because I focus here on self-creation and the ideology of divided identity, I do not discuss the full implications of the novels' complex thematics. I offer here a concentrated interpretation of Roth's objective to display the difficulty in formulating a self-created life in the American arena. Once again, the character searching for self-identity is a bifurcated self with contesting background and dreams.

In *The Human Stain*, Nathan Zuckerman, the narrator of *American Pastoral*, recounts the story of Coleman Silk, a brilliant Professor of Classics and Dean of Faculty

at Athena College, who is an African-American passing as a Jew. The reader knows Coleman's secret long before Zuckerman; through Zuckerman's eyes, we first meet and understand Coleman not as African-American, but as Jewish. So, Roth's truly African-American protagonist is, ostensibly, a Jewish-American character. Through Coleman's racial/cultural fluidity, Roth powerfully explores the concept of personal and cultural competition as Coleman competes against his birth and his fate.

Zuckerman hints at the indistinctness of Coleman's race in his opening description of Coleman as a "small-nosed Jewish type with the facial heft in the jaw, one of those crimped-haired Jews of light-yellowish skin pigmentation who possess something of the ambiguous aura of the pale blacks who are sometimes taken for white" (*HS* 15-16). Though Zuckerman does not yet understand the truth in his first aesthetic observation, his further deliberation of Coleman's body as "altogether the physique of someone who would seem to have been a cunning and wily competitor at sports rather than an overpowering one," is acutely perceptive (*HS* 21). Indeed, as a youth, Coleman is a menacing competitor in the boxing ring. Like Seymour "the Swede" Levov whose nickname, licensed by his gym teacher, gives way to his all-American alter-ego, Coleman becomes the boxer Silky Silk—not black or white or Jewish, but a self-created star in the boxing ring.

Coleman defies his conservative, academically-focused parents and secretly trains with a local Jewish dentist, Doc Chizner, who coaches privileged Jewish teenagers "to learn how to defend themselves" (*HS* 89). Coleman is not wholly unlike the Jewish boys that he himself eventually instructs. He too is a defensive fighter, developing his greatest skills as a reactionary combatant. One coach tells him, "Knock the punch down.

Counterpunch. You're a counterpuncher, Silky. That's what you are, that's all you are" (HS 90). His instructor's advice is predictive: throughout his life, Coleman utilizes "counterpunching" in the American cultural ring. That is, his countering blows as Silky Silk mirror Coleman's quick defensive moves as an adult. As if always in the boxing ring, Coleman consistently "could hit his opponent more by waiting for him to lead than by leading him" (HS 90). In accordance with Zuckerman's observation of Coleman as "a cunning and wily competitor," Coleman learns how to "get [him]self ready for whatever is going to come at [him]," so that he always is "rolling with the punch" (HS 21, 95-96).

Coleman's decision to pass as Jewish is the logical outgrowth of athletic counterpunching; by passing into the more tolerated Jewish culture, Coleman self-assertively parries the racist barricade against his 'blackness.' Even though the Jewish community is also a minority and therefore marginalized, Coleman's black community admires Jews as social pioneers who "were like Indian scouts, shrewd people showing the outsider the way in, showing the social possibility, showing an intelligent colored family how it might be done" (HS 97). For Coleman, a Jewish identification offers him a more liberated social passage—a Jew is more 'white' than an African-American. Similarly, for genuine Jewish-Americans who, like the Swede or the Patimkin family, choose to identify with the dominant American culture, the choice unlocks the gateway to the American Dream. Again, however, the choice to identify with one culture in denial of another destabilizes the individual's identification. For Coleman, his guilty loyalty to his community of origin initially limits his ability to pass into the American mainstream; hence, Coleman's first experience with racial passing occurs outside of his home turf.

An “undefeated counterpuncher,” Coleman wins bouts throughout the Newark area and follows Doc Chizner’s counsel to accept a fight at West Point (*HS* 101). Outside of his local sports ground, Coleman’s background is unknown; thus, Doc Chizner recommends that he not mention his race: ““If nothing comes up...you don’t bring it up. You’re neither one thing or the other. You’re Silky Silk. That’s enough. That’s the deal”” (*HS* 99). Doc Chizner’s support of Coleman’s unique and allegedly colorless self-identity as Silky Silk motivates Coleman’s choice to continue passing. Moreover, “Silky’s freedom. The raw I. All the subtlety of being Silky Silk,” affords Coleman a secret power (*HS* 108). Unlike other African-Americans, whose observable race socially cripples them, Coleman’s race is a secret tool of empowerment by which he could be “counterconfessional in the same way [he is] a counterpuncher” (*HS* 100). Coleman even likens his newfound identity to a knock-out punch in the nose, or as Doc Chizner says, “the labonz” (*HS* 101). After his first victorious bout of passing as white, in which Coleman takes out his West Point opponent with a ferocious nose-crushing maneuver, Coleman muses, “*Self*-discovery—*that* was the punch to the labonz. Singularity. The passionate struggle for singularity. The singular animal...Self-knowledge but *concealed*. What is as powerful as that?” (*HS* 108) Thus, Coleman conceives self-identity as a knocking-out of an organic fixture and creating something (or someone) entirely new.<sup>3</sup> Importantly however, Coleman relishes his “concealed” self-identity; thus, his self-identity is not constructed by entirely eliminating an original identity, but by *hiding* it.

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<sup>3</sup> Fittingly, boxing first became popular with the ancient Romans as a means by which slaves and criminals could fight for their freedom. Even after being freed, the ex-slaves and convicts would only be given marginal status. Like Coleman, a refined classicist whose association to these early fighters is indubitable, the victorious, “freed” combatant cannot entirely eliminate his original identity.



Coleman's improved cultural status as a Jew and the personal confidence it engenders hurl him into the academic select of New York University as well as the professional boxing league of New York City. While cultivating his intellectual (and thereby stereotypically 'white') identity at New York University, Coleman also continues to box, allegorically fighting his suppressed identity of origin. At one particularly critical match against a black opponent, Coleman's white promoter casually, "slap[s] him on the behind and, in his meaty whisper, [tells] him, 'Feel the nigger out in the first round, see what he's got, Silky, and give the people their money's worth'" (HS 116). When Coleman knocks his contender out in the first round, his promoter admonishes him and asks why he could not have restrained his gamesmanship in the name of profitable showmanship. Significantly, Coleman snaps, "'Because I don't carry no nigger'" (HS 117). Coleman's defensive and ironic retort communicates his triumph over his African-American status. In retributively knocking out his black competition, Silky Silk knocks out Coleman Silk, the black burden he will no longer carry.

Like the Swede, the loss of Coleman's foundational cultural identity becomes both his fate and his curse. Though "all he'd ever wanted, from earliest childhood on, was to be free: not black, not even white—just on his own and free," Coleman's supposedly liberating and empowering secret imprisons him because his secret *becomes* his identity (HS 120). Coleman remembers,

That's why he liked shadowboxing and hitting the heavy bag: for the secrecy in it...some guys just banged away at the heavy bag. Not Coleman. Coleman *thought*, and the same way that he thought in school or in a race: rule

everything else out, let nothing else in, and immerse  
yourself in the thing, the subject, the competition, the  
exam—whatever's to be mastered, become that thing. (*HS*  
100)

Thus, Coleman masters his secret, beating down his identity of origin and becoming a secretive passing figure and lifelong counterpuncher—he becomes a disappearing ghost to both his black family and his old identity. Ironically, Coleman indecorously leaves Athena College enveloped in racist scandal. Referring to two absent students who, unbeknownst to Coleman, are black, Coleman rhetorically asks the class, “Does anyone know these people? Do they exist or are they spooks?” (*HS* 6) Coleman, replete with the vocabularies of two ancient languages and whose mastery of words is careful and precise, means “spooks” in the most common sense of the word—as in ‘ghost’; however, the black students accuse Coleman of invoking a racial epithet and he is forced to resign in disgrace from his position as Dean. Of course, the ridiculous indictment could easily be resolved were Coleman to reveal his true African-American identity; he points out, with great irony, that he is ““thrown out of a Norfolk whorehouse for being black, thrown out of Athena College for being white”” (*HS* 16). Still, Coleman holds fast his secret. Most interesting and revealing, however, is Coleman’s subliminal choice of the word “spooks” (*HS* 6). Unlike his deliberately ironic use of a racial slur at the professional boxing match, “spooks” is furtively incriminating. After all, it is Coleman who is the most spectral figure in the novel, suffering from the self’s loss through diaphanous concealment. Even as he angrily defends himself against Athena College, his greatest conflict is against himself and the formation of his identity beginning nearly four decades

past. Coleman continually shadowboxes against his buried selves, but never lands a successful counterpunch against his own spooky history.

Coleman's past, posthumously recounted to Zuckerman by Coleman's sister Ernestine, does not follow him throughout life, it leads his life. Coleman obsesses over the formation of his Jewish identity, as if he were winning a better cultural opportunity. He marries a Jewish woman, not for love, but because her hair, "that sinuous thicket of hair that was far more Negroid than Coleman's," promises little question over the race of his doubtless kinky-haired kids (*HS* 136). Coleman uses the language of competition to reflect how his marriage to a Jewish woman guarantees his place "back in the ring" whereby "he comes roaring out of his corner," with a secret protected by the fact that he has a Jewish wife (*HS* 135). But if Coleman's cultural history is his opponent, then his competition is against his entire community of origin—a community with which he must learn to identify before he secures a grounded self-identity. Nevertheless, Coleman constantly claims, "I am not one of you, I can't bear you, I am not part of your Negro we' credo"; instead, Coleman enlists in "the great heroic struggle against *their* we" (*HS* 183, emphasis mine). Ernestine appropriately compares Coleman to their older brother Walt, whose activism during the Civil Rights Movement changes the entire nation's conception of race. Zuckerman recognizes,

Her point was that Coleman was *not* one of those ex-GIs fighting for integration and equality and civil rights; in Walt's opinion, he was never fighting for anything other than himself, Silky Silk. That's who he fought as, who he fought for, and that's why Walt could never stand

Coleman, even when Coleman was a boy. In it for himself,  
Walt used to say. In it always for Coleman alone. (*HS*  
324)

Ironically, however, even if Coleman is “in it for himself” in his search for an individual identity, he carries the weight of his inescapable history. His separation from his cultural origin resembles the loss of identity suffered by the Swede. Indeed, Zuckerman summarizes Coleman’s tragically typical American pursuit “To become a new being. To bifurcate” as the “drama that underlies America’s story, the high drama that is upping and leaving—and the energy and cruelty that rapturous drive demands” (*HS* 342).

Zuckerman remembers that Coleman’s rage against his fate “was like being present at a bad highway accident or a fire or a frightening explosion” as if “I was witnessing...the amputated rest of him spinning out of control” (*HS* 11). Like the Swede, Coleman rejects the cultural foundation of his family in favor of individual agency and self-creation. Of course, the results of cultural denial are lethal: Coleman dies when he is driven off the road by his lover’s ex-husband, troubled by his own ghosts of the past. Similarly to the Swede, who is no Johnny Appleseed, Coleman cannot live a fictitious life of monochrome Silky Silk fantasy. After all, as the name *Coleman* archly implies, Coleman *is* a black man (even if his skin is not black as coal) and no ‘silky’ comportment can beat down this original identity.

You Are What You Eat: “The Phenomenon Known as  
Hating Your Goy And Eating One Too”<sup>4</sup> in *Portnoy’s Complaint*  
and *Goodbye, Columbus*

If Roth enlists competition in its literal and metaphorical understanding as a way to showcase vexed forms of passing, divided identities and various other roadblocks to the formation of a coherent Jewish-American identity, food offers Roth another arena through which the author portrays the Jewish-American struggle to self-identify. In the kitchen, Roth plays out the divisions of Jewish-American self-identity where food functions as a literal ingestion of cultural values and traditions. The walls of the kitchen represent cultural boundaries; to tread beyond its boundaries activates a poisonous stew, a mish-mash of kosher restrictions and forbidden *chazerai* or *terefah*. Roth emphasizes that since “Jews eat what Jews eat,” kosher laws utterly separate Jewish-Americans from “*them*,” the uncontrolled, gluttonous mouthy-millions of goyim who “gorge themselves upon anything and everything that moves” (*Portnoy’s Complaint* 82, 81). For Jews, food regulations model “self-control, sobriety, and sanctions—this is the key to a human life, saith all those endless dietary laws” (*PC* 80). For Roth, the threat of death or illness inspires the remarkable magnitude of Jewish self-discipline and strength of will, seeing as un-kosher foods ““can kill you!”” (*PC* 91) Explicitly, non-Jewish eating practices not only affect the individual, but threaten the entire Jewish population, a *l*á Holocaustian genocide: ““*Hamburgers*’ she says bitterly, just as she might say ‘*Hitler*’” (*PC* 33).

Upholding traditional Jewish dining rituals protects both the individual and the greater cultural health. Food acts as a metaphor for cultural identity, hence “preserving

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<sup>4</sup> *Portnoy’s Complaint*, page 233

local food habits both practically and metaphorically promotes the survival of a variety of local and ethnic groups because community members experience and transmit their local identity in terms of food-related experiences” (Encyclopedia of Food and Culture 491). Since “food may establish a cultural identity of an ethnic group or religion...food taboos in a society function also as a means to show differences between various groups and strengthen their cultural identity” (384). Certainly, kosher laws work as a Jewish cultural identifier and fortifier while simultaneously separating the Jewish community from the cultural smorgasbord of the American table. But Roth’s characters repeatedly disobey the limits of their Jewish gastronomic selection; in fact, they display an insatiable need to transgress, a desire for literal and symbolic oral transgression which, importantly, “turns out to have something to do with love and sex” (Shechner 414). The most primitive feeding act, breast-feeding, is instinctive and nutritious; all the while, breast-feeding is an undeniable sexualizing force. While serving a gastronomically nourishing purpose, the teasing and suckling at a mother’s breast also initiates the curious interdependency of oral and sexual craving. Roth’s understanding of this primitively nutritious and sexual act inspires characters, especially Alexander Portnoy of *Portnoy’s Complaint* and Neil Klugman of *Goodbye, Columbus*, to perpetually unite food and sex.

By underlining the perilous correlation between healthy Jewish eating and reckless consumption, Roth suggests that unorthodox eating habits instigate sexual transgression. Practices of the kitchen directly relate to the practices of the bedroom. By extension, maintaining healthy Jewish gastronomical habits promises the regeneration of the Jewish population; Roth consistently points out that eating goyim *chazerai* begets a *shikse* in the bedroom. Of course, traditional Jewish parents cling desperately to the

partition between kosher and unkosher, Jewish and non-Jewish; meanwhile, their Jewish-American sons anxiously nibble at the forbidden flavors of the American banquet. “For the son, naturally, *chazerai* symbolizes freedom, sexual freedom,” but for Roth, however, freedom, is not just impossible, it is in bad culinary and sexual taste (Shechner 417-418).

## I

Roth sets the table for investigation of food allegories most impressively in *Portnoy's Complaint*. Alexander Portnoy is Roth's manic composite of Jewishness and would-be American individualism. He relentlessly enacts primal crimes by defying kosher laws “both in his eager devouring of unkosher meat and lobster and his pursuit of non-Jewish women” (Baumgarten 88). But Alex Portnoy sees the Jewish “rules which you either obey...or you transgress, most likely in the name of common sense” as downright ridiculous: he asks, “what else but to give us little Jewish children practice in being repressed?” (*PC* 79-80). This repression provides Portnoy with a Jewish morality (and immorality) that instigates transgression and, more importantly, corrupts moral and oral convention. Ever a product of his home, Portnoy's own family conflates morality and orality. Specifically, the possible sexual transgression of Portnoy's father intersects the gluttony of his son. Instancing his merger of sexual and culinary appetite, Portnoy reflects,

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 who owns 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? (*PC* 87)

Roth shows us that in the Portnoy family's system of ethics, transgressions of food and sex are interchangeable. Portnoy himself confesses that "the worst thing I have ever done" conflates food and sex: "I fucked my own family's dinner" (*PC* 134). Indeed, Portnoy recounts his multiple 'encounters' with a tantalizingly fleshy food:

I believe that I have already confessed to the piece of liver that I bought in a butcher shop and banged behind a billboard on the way to a bar mitzvah lesson. Well, I wish to make a clean breast of it, Your Holiness. That—she—it—wasn't my first piece. My first piece I had in the privacy of my own home, rolled round my cock in the bathroom at three-thirty—and then had again on the end of a fork, at five-thirty, along with the other members of that poor innocent family of mine. (*PC* 134)

Portnoy's primitive understanding of the food/sex correlation triggers the oral fixation with pudding and pussy, liver and ladies, forbidden food and forbidden sex. It is understandable then that Portnoy appropriately, though unusually, admits "I'm eight years old and chocolate pudding happens to get me hot" (*PC* 87).

Portnoy's imperious mother, Sophie, controls him with food and prohibits his purchase of American manhood by stuffing, suffocating him with oral dependency. An excessive and daunting figure, Sophie Portnoy attempts to regulate everything that



Portnoy eats and expels. Says Ralph Shechner: “[Sophie] wants nothing less than the annexation of her son, the full possession of and control over his manhood, and she’ll have it by stalling his growth at a level of oral dependence” (419). Though Sophie attempts to stultify gastronomic and sexual desire through repression, she ironically engenders transgression. Thus, in reaction to his mother’s tyranny, Portnoy rushes to the bathroom to masturbate “before meals. After meals. During meals” and feigns diarrhea for protection (*PC* 19). In particular, Portnoy frenziedly masturbates after having indulged in evil *chazerai*; he, of course, blames the time spent in the bathroom on uncontrollable fictional flux. So, the bathroom, like the kitchen, is a noteworthy and troubled locale: here, sanctuary is unviable as long as Sophie stands, and often yells, from the other side of the door. Thus the bathroom, an uncomfortable location of discharge and delivery, parodies the repression of the kitchen.

One must wonder whether it is more lecherous in the Portnoy home for the men to defecate or ejaculate, for neither liberation is permitted with ease. Unlike his avidly discharging son, Portnoy’s consummately constipated progenitor, Jake Portnoy, suffers for hours in the bathroom, “weary and afflicted” by his “blockaded body” (*PC* 5). His regulated Jewish diet, overseen by ubiquitous Sophie, is agonizingly restrictive: “his *kishkas* were gripped by the iron hand” of his unyielding wife (*PC* 5). The strict Jewish diet suppresses Jake’s discharges; meanwhile, his son experiences irrepressible ejaculate as a result of his gluttony: thus one man suffers from extreme repression, the other from transgression.

Portnoy’s excessive teenage ejaculation turns into adulthood impotence, however. Estelle Gershgoren Novak points out that “[Portnoy’s] father’s constipation is the

predecessor of Alex's impotence. They are parallel problems. Neither can release what needs to be released" (Milbauer and Watson 61). So, even if Sophie is not literally standing in the bathroom with her masturbating son or her constipated husband, her presence is inextricable. Like Ronald, the teenage piano prodigy who pins a perfunctory note to his mother on his shirt when he hangs himself in the bathroom, Portnoy too wears his mother's ubiquitous presence while he frees himself in the toilet. Sexually parodying Ronald's asphyxiation, Portnoy too is suffocated in his greatest act of personal deliverance, sexual liberation.

Sophie's persistent presence comes into view when Portnoy leaves his family bathroom and brings his sexuality into public. Portnoy compares himself to his "daring" friend Smolka, whom Portnoy insightfully defines, horrified, as having "*a mother who works*" (PC 172). The absence of Smolka's mother (and her correlating absence from the kitchen) liberates Smolka sexually. On the other hand, Sophie, ever-present and tied to the kitchen, restricts Portnoy's sexual success. Fittingly, Smolka successfully completes oral sex with Bubbles Girardi ("on his own bed!") while Portnoy, finishing himself off, comes in his own eye in front of Bubbles (PC 173). Portnoy attributes the failure of his first experience with oral sex to his mother: while Smolka "lives on Hostess cupcakes and his own wits...I get a hot lunch and all the inhibitions thereof. [Smolka having] A mother who works...sufficiently explains everything to me" (PC 173).

Rightly, Sophie prophesizes her son's sexual transgressions and, for protection, enacts a terrifying and violent regimen against dietary contravention. Simply, "when [Portnoy] refuse[s] to eat [his] dinner," Sophie emblematically threatens castration by brandishing a long bread knife (PC 43). Frightened by his dietary defiance, Sophie

declares “*My Alex is such a bad eater I have to stand over him with a knife*”; that is, she feels she must physically terrorize him because he “[doesn’t] want the food from her mouth”—he doesn’t want her Jewish fare and the moral/oral dependency it represents (PC 43, 16). Of course, Sophie justifies this martial warning as being “*for [Alex’s] own good*” (PC 16). Her intent, however, is more complex. She instinctively understands the correlation between Jewish eating practices and Jewish mating practices. Bad eaters, explicitly those who refuse indulgence in “a real Jewish meal” cannot or will not produce good Jewish progeny (PC 83). Portnoy’s mother forecasts his refusal to procreate in a metaphor of food. Sophie contends that “it begins with diarrhea,” that is, covert masturbation over *shiksas*, and “it finally ends...wearing a plastic bag to do your business in!” (PC 32) Here, diarrhea is the rampant expulsion of unhealthy waste, in contrast to proper digestion from healthy intake. Masturbation, in a similar manner to diarrhea, recalls images of rampant, wasteful action that proper reproduction restricts. In this way, “the plastic bag to do your business in” not only refers to a waste-catching sack for the gluttonous incontinent, but foreshadows Portnoy’s anti-procreative ejaculation into a rubber, hindering new Jewish life (PC 32). Knife-wielding Sophie, it seems, would rather castrate her son than watch him feed on and with the Other Side, the indulgent, non-Jewish world.

Still, Sophie’s most willful deterrents, namely the oft-recounted lobster-lesson, do not discourage her son from craving American food and women. In fact, Sophie’s own dramatic seduction by a lobster prophesies Portnoy’s encounter. Having eaten the forbidden crustacean, Sophie vividly bewails that she “was throwing up so hard [my fingers] got stiff like this, like I was *paralyzed*” (PC 92). Likewise, after a forbidden

lobster dinner, Portnoy stiffens and ejects—only he does so with his penis: “He sucks one night on a lobster’s claw and within the hour his cock is out and aimed at a *shikse* on a Public Service bus” (PC 82). With this sin and emanation, all of Sophie’s Jewish paranoia materializes. In his interconnected act of wild gluttony and lust, Portnoy directly unites food taboos with sexual taboos. His mother was right all along; after all, with “that taboo so easily and simply broken, confidence may have been given to the whole slimy Dionysian side of my nature” (PC 79). Yet contrary to his mother’s desperately carnal warning, Portnoy happily proclaims that “the lesson may have been learned that to break the law, all you have to do is—just go ahead and break it!” (PC 79) And so he does.

But Sophie’s prophesy is not unfounded. She instructs, “There are plenty of good things to eat in the world, Alex, without eating a thing like a lobster and running the risk of having paralyzed hands for the rest of your life” (PC 94). Sophie’s “paralyzed hands” not only mimic her son’s erection “aimed at a *shikse*,” but, in addition, portend Portnoy’s future impotence. Indeed, if he indulges in deleterious *terefah*, Portnoy will (and does) become sexually paralyzed. In the end, as Sophie warns, *shiksese* “WILL EAT YOU UP ALIVE!” (PC 189).

Despite his mother’s efforts, Portnoy cannot master his (table) manners to curb his transgressive culinary and sexual appetite. He so fully equates oral dependence with love (or at the very least sex) that he obsessively ‘eats out’ *shikse* girls in order to enter their non-Jewish world. If the prohibited lobster was an aphrodisiac, then a real, live *shikse* sends him “into a state of desire *beyond a hard-on*”; he absolutely worships (and then makes every attempt to penetrate) “these blond-haired Christians [who] are the

legitimate residents and owners of this place” (*PC* 144, 146). He is, as Bruno Bettelheim aptly puts it, “crazy in his efforts to wring oral satisfaction out of sex” (Bloom 31).

Undeniably, orality is at the apex of Portnoy’s *cunt craziness*<sup>5</sup>. He involves food in many of his sexual dream-encounters with “Thereal McCoy,” the imaginary slutty aggregate of all *shiksese* in his long-sustained fantasy:

She pushes Drake’s Daredevil Cupcakes (chocolate with a white creamy center) down over my cock and then eats them off of me, flake by flake. She pours maple syrup out of the Log Cabin can and then licks it from my tender balls until they’re clean again as a little baby boy’s. (*PC* 131)

Additionally, Portnoy sucks on her “nipple the size of a tollhouse cookie” while she perseverates his perverse oral fixation by “whispering every filthy word she knows viciously in my ear” (*PC* 132). Clearly, Portnoy reduces every sexual encounter, fantastical or literal, to an oral fixation inspired by his mother.

Portnoy does everything in his power to transgress his family’s Jewish restrictions. In an attempt to assert his individuality and, more importantly, his American-ness, Portnoy is voracious in his craving of un-Jewish food and women. He thinks he learns a lesson from the Americans he so desperately wants to become: “They will eat *anything*, anything they can get their big *goy* hands on! And the terrifying corollary, *they will do anything as well!*” (*PC* 81) Since food is a vehicle for cultural repression and liberation, the Goyische freedoms, dietary and otherwise, similarly motivate Portnoy to practice uncontrollable and often ghastly perverse self-indulgence. He will eat and fuck anything—he *will* be American!—if only he could overcome Jewish

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<sup>5</sup> “Cunt Crazy” is the fourth chapter of *Portnoy’s Complaint*, page 78

retribution and guilt, if only he could forget his stuffing, castrating mother! Thus screams Portnoy: “Bless me with manhood! Make me brave! Make me strong! Make me *whole!* Enough being a nice Jewish boy, publicly pleasing my parents while privately pulling my putz! Enough!” (PC 37) Despite Portnoy’s aggressive pursuit of gastronomic and sexual indulgence, his detachment from motherly regulation inevitably limits him: he becomes impotent for Naomi, a strident Israeli-Zionist whose likeness to his mother proves to be utterly paralyzing. His impotence inspires self-revelation about his gluttonous misdirection: “Maybe I was just being myself. Maybe that’s all I really am, a lapper of cunt, the slavish mouth for some woman’s hole. Eat! And so be it!” (PC 270)

## II

Roth also portions out the divisions of Jewish-American identity in his first novella, *Goodbye, Columbus*. Unlike *Portnoy’s Complaint*, in which tantalizing food propels the protagonist into forbidden sexual heresies and thus into Goy America, the culinary and sexual temptation of *Goodbye, Columbus* exists in Jewry itself—in the assimilated, suburban Jews, successfully passing as the fortunate Americans fulfilling the American Dream. The story’s narrator, Neil Klugman, hails from the heart of the Jewish immigrant homeland, Newark, New Jersey, and falls into a summer romance with Brenda Patimkin, originally of Newark. Following the success of her father’s Newark-based plumbing-supply warehouse, Brenda is now at home in the lofty luxury of Short Hills, an elegant suburb portentously hovering over lowly Newark.

While both Neil and Brenda are Jewish, they are clearly two different kinds of Jew: Neil is of the Old World, more Jewish than American (“I’m...dark”), while country-club Brenda is Americanized and thereby worshipped by Neil, as if she were an

American goddess (*GC* 7). Her father even attests, ““They’re *goyim*, my kids, that’s how much they understand [of Jewishness]”” (*GC* 37). Busy imitating the ‘Wasy’ upper class of suburbia, the Patimkin children do not relate to their Jewish origins and culture. Instead, the family develops a peculiarly American “system of programmed responses to conspicuous consumption, including food, rather than [develop] the values of the close-knit family of the urban Jewish neighborhood” (Baumgarten 31). All the while, Brenda emerges as a figure of American potential: goddess-like and untouchable, she represents the grand apotheosis of her family’s rise above their limiting Jewish-immigrant culture. Thus, Brenda is a symbol of cultural abundance while Neil’s status determines an undeniable cultural difference. Specifically, the ill-fated pair demonstrates the difference between the American plenty of Brenda’s world and the appetitive want of Neil’s marginalized culture.

Neil’s highly symbolic passage from Newark to Short Hills is representative of his own attempt at cultural advancement. He journeys out of “the cindery darkness of [the Newark] alley” and ascends “the one hundred and eighty feet that the suburbs rose in altitude above Newark, br[inging] one closer to heaven” (*GC* 9, 8). Hence, Short Hills is nothing short of the plentiful yet ill-omened Garden of Eden. In this place, Brenda entices Neil with her promising garden of cultural abundance, tempting him with her literal and metaphorical fruit. Recalling biblical Genesis, Neil gains personal knowledge from transgression: he trespasses by gorging on the Patimkin cornucopia, but is ultimately banished from the Patimkin Garden. While consuming sinful temptations, Neil himself is consumed by a culture to which he does not belong, a consumer culture of the American Dream of excess.

Roth uses food as a signifier of cultural difference between Neil and the Patimkins. Neil lives with his prudent Aunt Gladys, preoccupied with healthy Jewish eating, to the extent that she serves four different meals at four different times to four different people. While Neil concludes that “there is nothing to explain this beyond the fact that my aunt is crazy,” Aunt Gladys’ obsession with consumption is in the name of practical economy (*GC* 4). Neil aptly recognizes that

Life was a throwing off for poor Aunt Gladys, her greatest joys were taking out the garbage, emptying her pantry, and mailing threadbare bundles for what she still referred to as the Poor Jews of Palestine. I only hope she dies with an empty refrigerator, otherwise she’ll ruin eternity for everyone else, what with her Velveeta turning green, and her navel oranges growing fuzzy jackets down below. (*GC* 6-7)

Aunt Gladys’ thrifty relationship to food emphasizes proper use and charity. Neil, unsurprisingly, contests his aunt’s traditionally Jewish alimentary ethics and hurries off to the “fancy-schmancy” Patimkin dining room (*GC* 20).

Neil’s first dining experience with the Patimkins is a lesson in pure indulgence and consumption. The momentous scene is encased in images of consumerism. Neil quickly observes that,

Outside, through the wide picture window, I could see the back lawn with its twin oak trees. I say oaks, though fancifully, one might call them sporting-goods trees.



Beneath their branches, like fruit dropped from their limbs,  
were two irons, a golf ball, a tennis can, a baseball bat,  
basketball, a first-baseman's glove, and what was  
apparently a riding crop. (GC 21-22)

The twin "sporting-goods trees" serve as the Patimkin *axis mundi*, revealing that their center of the world is rooted in commerce and produces unnatural, trivial objects.

Roth rhetorically constructs this significant dinner scene in the dialogue of a script. In doing so, Jonathon Radan comments that Roth shows "the banality of the [dinner] conversation has to stand on its own" (Bloom 23). Since the conversation is "lost in the passing of food, the words gurgled into mouthfuls, the syntax chopped and forgotten in heaping, spillings, gorgings," the reader learns that the Patimkin family focuses solely on chronic consumption (GC 22). Accordingly, the "heavy and methodical and serious" Patimkin gustatory habits serve as "a place to display the consumerism of eating" and, more specifically, the Patimkins' *general* consumerism (GC 22; Cooper 44). Indeed, the Patimkins barely consider the food they are downing; their dietary aggression is akin to rampant consumerism. Neil ogles at Mr. Patimkin, "a ferocious eater" of Herculean effect, for "when he attacked his salad—after drenching it in bottled French dressing—the veins swelled under the heavy skin of his forearm" (GC 21). Meanwhile, Mr. Patimkin notes that Neil "eats like a bird," portending Neil's fundamental failure to indulge in the feast of American consumer culture (GC 23). Neil's spare appetite weakens his credibility for the Patimkins. Mr. Patimkin measures Neil's viability as an American male through his gastronomic gusto. Neil laments, "I might have eaten ten times my normal amount, have finally killed myself with food, he (Mr.

Patimkin) would still have considered me not a man but a sparrow” (*GC* 56). Thus, Neil immediately registers that to be ‘American-enough’ for Brenda Patimkin, he must learn to indulge with careless abandon.

The Patimkin lackadaisical appreciation for kosher restrictions marks a separation from their traditional Jewish cultural identity and the acquisition of a decidedly American identity. Characteristically American consumption overwhelms the family’s reverence for kosher laws. Neil notes Mrs. Patimkin’s casual and belated direction to their maid, Carlota, “not to mix the milk silverware and the meat silverware again” as Carlota idly “is eating a peach while she listens” (*GC* 24). Even the household-help indulges in fresh fruit, the harvest of American consumerist glut, while being reminded of a mistake she has clearly repeated. Notably, Carlota, “a Navaho-faced Negro who had little holes in her ears but no earrings,” is stripped of her lower cultural indicators, her earrings, in the name of uppity Patimkin propriety (*GC* 21). Hence, Carlota, like Neil, spans the cultural gap: she deserts signs of her personal and cultural identity of origin, yet feeds off the Patimkin surplus. Neil’s image of her “eating a peach and holding a pail of garbage in her free hand,” epitomizes Neil and Carlota’s bifurcated dilemma (*GC* 29). On the one hand, they excitedly devour the produce of American consumerism, while, on the other hand, they must throw out the ‘trash’ out of which they themselves originate. Astutely, Neil recognizes Carlota’s hegemonic satisfaction with her position; she, after all, “made household chores seem like illustrative gestures of whatever it was she was singing” (*GC* 77). Seemingly oblivious to her work, “she chewed and chewed, humming all the time, and then, with a deliberated casualness, shot the [grape] skin and the pit directly into the garbage disposal unit” (*GC* 77). Neil admits that “I felt like Carlota,” but he is “not even

as comfortable as that”: unlike Carlota, he understands that he cannot swallow Patimkin ethos without ‘throwing out’ something of his own (*GC* 40).

Still, before Neil ultimately rejects the Patimkins’ deceptive Eden, he “is partially wooed and won on Patimkin fruit” (*GC* 77). Significantly, Neil discovers the plenteous stores of food and ‘stuff’ in the Patimkin basement, which “contained innumerable electrical appliances, including a freezer big enough to house a family of Eskimos” (*GC* 42). Stored in the basement, the jumbo freezer and varied appliances point to the utterly commodified underbelly of the Patimkin household. Amidst “all the bacchanalian paraphernalia, plentiful, orderly and untouched,” the “tall old refrigerator,” the most potent symbol of Patimkin consumerism,

was heaped with fruit, shelves swelled with it, every color, every texture, and hidden within, every kind of pit. There were greengage plums, black plums, red plums, apricots, nectarines, peaches, long horns of grapes, black, yellow, red, and cherries, cherries flowing out of boxes and staining everything scarlet. And there were melons—cantaloupes and honeydews—and on the top shelf, half of a huge watermelon, a thin sheet of wax paper clinging to its bare red face like a wet lip. (*GC* 42-43)

This tempting fruit of the refrigerator, a “peculiarly American cornucopiae of national abundance” seduces Neil and inspires him to extol, “Oh Patimkin! Fruit grew in their refrigerator and sporting goods dropped from their trees!” (France 84; *GC* 43). Indeed, the sensuous description of bounty attests to Neil’s visceral understanding of Patimkin

affluence. Titillating with sexual delectability, the wet watermelon and the overflowing cherries portend Neil's transgressive and symbolic ingestion of Patimkin values. But, as foreshadowed by the "cherries...staining everything scarlet," he too will wear the stain of the fruits of indulgence. Moreover, in his first secret feast he hurriedly "grab[s] a handful of cherries and then a nectarine, and [bites] right down to its pit" (*GC* 43). The merciless pit, hidden yet ubiquitous, symbolizes the hardened core of American society, the useless debris of the working class. Neil self-consciously "put[s] the pit in my pocket" and later "flushe[s] [them] down the toilet," thereby symbolically hiding his own pitted origins (*GC* 44, 45). Alas, even the refrigerator serves as a lingering reminder of the Patimkins' origins in Newark. The old appliance is secreted downstairs, but purposefully overstuffed with the lush produce of their new, wealthy identification; and of course, Neil too greedily overstuffs himself with the new cultural fruits.

The fruit metaphor not only denotes the bountiful product of Patimkin suburban success, but also recalls the biblical importance of fruit, that is, forbidden fruit, as well as the sexual germination of Neil's relationship with Brenda. As a liberated, decidedly American figure, Brenda is a desirable cultural commodity for lowly Neil. Through Brenda and her family, Neil tastes the nectar of upward social and cultural mobility. In this way, the fruit stands for Brenda's tempting harvest of sweetened cultural abundance and her sexual plenty. By feeding at the Patimkin table and illicitly stealing fruit, Neil indicates his symbiotic desire for forbidden sexual indulgence. When Neil recollects, "[Brenda] felt like a greengage plum," he unknowingly puts forth both a literal and figurative interpretation (*GC* 54). In 'feeling' like the fruit, Brenda literally desires to eat

a greengage plum; however, she simultaneously “fe[els] like a greengage plum” because she *is* a greengage plum—a symbol of excess and sexual fecundity.

Brenda’s precocious little sister, Julie, ominously admonishes Neil for “‘stealing fruit’” the very night “Brenda and I made love, our first time” (*GC* 45). Their sexual union solidifies Neil’s cultural ascent, with “Brenda falling, slowly, but with a smile, and me rising” (*GC* 46). Still, Brenda willingly offers her illicit ‘fruits’ to Neil, for the temptress herself soon leads him to the teeming fruit refrigerator. In turn, their summer plummets into a saturnalian banquet of forbidden sex and bottomless bowls of fruit. Now having ingested her ethos by way of food and sex, Neil complicates his foundational Jewish identity with an idealized American identity, headlined by his American enchantress. Thus, as foreshadowed by the ever-present fruit pits and the ominous staining cherries in the fruit refrigerator, Neil over-indulges “until, I have to admit, I cracked my frail bowel and we would have to spend the following night, sadly, on the wagon” (*GC* 54). More permanently, however, Neil suffers the sore, Hawthornesque stain of transgression after eating and sleeping with Brenda. He remembers, “I could always feel cherry pits against my bare soles. And at home, undressing for the second time that night, I would find red marks on the undersides of my feet” (*GC* 56). His feet, bearing the weight of his cultural transportation and transformation, are dyed by the pretty flesh of forbidden fruits. Interestingly, Neil’s ‘stain’ cannot even be purified by his frequent dips in the pristine waters of the Green Lane Country Club swimming pool. Suggesting Christian baptism or Jewish mikvah, Neil’s ritual submersions do not purify him. Neil is not to be reborn as a Jewish-American savior, an emblem of Jewish success and American promise—a perfect Jewish-American compromise. Since he does not

completely sell off his personal identity and buy into Patimkian values, he is expelled from their bounteous Garden.

While Neil admits in a desperate and self-conscious prayer that “I am carnal...I am acquisitive”; his gluttonous gorging on Patimkin fruit does not satiate him, for it is an empty indulgence (*GC* 101). Neil “fe[els] open-stomached, as though I hadn’t eaten for months,” yet continually feeds on Brenda’s sexual and cultural fruit as he “went back inside and came out with my own handful of grapes” (*GC* 77). “The feeling continue[s]” as Neil recognizes the hollowness of his endeavor to enter the American ideal through Brenda (*GC* 77). Moreover, Neil realizes that Brenda herself is commodified, already pitted with barren American consumerism. He knows that the potential of achieving the American Dream, as personified by Brenda, is a wasteful endeavor that necessitates a reckless disposal of ‘pits,’ the seeded geneses of bounty itself. Thus, Neil ultimately remains a divided Jewish-American; at least now he has traversed the “lousy hundred and eighty feet,” collected the boon of knowledge and returned to Newark with a more enlightened sense of self-identity (*GC* 14). Neil certainly enters the world of the Patimkins through food, but he exits their ensnared Garden with a fruitful understanding of his complex desires and necessary cultural path. After all, it is he who leaves Brenda alone in the impersonal coldness of a hotel room, as he looks forward to sun “rising on the first day of the Jewish New Year,” a day of prayer and searching for one’s self (*GC* 136).

Verbal Beans, Bravado and Barriers: The Tell-All of Rothian Oral Fixation  
in *The Great American Novel*, *Portnoy's Complaint*,  
and *American Pastoral*

In a logical extension of his interest in the connection between culinary taboos and sexual taboos, Roth returns to the mouth as the foremost site of cultural ingestion and expression. With the mouth as the nexus of intake and outtake, speech functions as a cultural identifier, like the loaded act of eating discussed previously. Roth's acute ear for natural dialogue gifts his characters with tell-tale dialects and linguistic style. He consciously maneuvers his characters' speech to impart their elemental personality or crisis. Yet, what Jay L. Halio calls Roth's "linguistic virtuosity" not only refers to the author's own keen facility of language, but speaks to the oral fixation of Roth's characters (Halio 78). Desperately in need of expressing their personal and cultural situation, Roth's characters obsess over their words and make talking a paramount part of their lives. Excessive talkers, complainers, screamers, stutterers and rhymers, Roth's characters are never at a loss for words, but the words are never easy either; they are, more often than not, obscene, ridiculous or muddled together. Thus, despite their oral fixation, Roth's characters say quite a lot, but rarely communicate their precise feelings—everything to be understood about the characters must be read between the lines of their speech. So, while they are undoubtedly loquacious, Roth's characters are unable to master the exacting art of communication. Their wooly expression corresponds to the complexity of Jewish-American cultural identification; that is, the uncertainty of their cultural identity comes through in their incapacity to accurately and succinctly articulate themselves.

## I

Roth showcases his linguistic flexibility in *The Great American Novel*. His most obvious and scatological manipulation of language, Roth's verbal mania is an exhausting comic effort. While the language successfully parades the breadth of American dialects, this great undertaking silences the power of the individual voice to expose and comment on his situation. In this way, Roth is too wrapped up in the words and does not consider what they are actually conveying; he is, as Bernard Rodgers puts it, using "comedy for its own sake" and, in turn, loses the directness of an authorial voice (Rodgers 109). Roth's voice, the narrator, appropriately yet absurdly named Word Smith a.k.a. Smitty, is a monomaniacal, self-congratulatory sports writer who blathers relentlessly in his 46 page Prologue about writing and words. The language of his Prologue is heavily and hilariously alliterative, a rhetorical technique meant to elevate Smitty's work to the position of the Great American Novel. Beginning with the use of alliteration, the most archaic form of English poetry, Smitty locates his novel amidst literary cornerstones despite his unusual subject matter. But Smitty's consonance quickly turns into a hyperbolic form of self-aggrandizement and his "immortal gift of gab" drowns out effective character profiling (*GAN* 5).

I point out Roth's unsuccessful linguistic effort here only to draw attention to his winning use of language in other novels. In fact, even if this novel ineffectively negotiates the complexities of language, it serves to highlight Roth's obsession with language; after all, he audaciously dubs his narrative alter-ego, Word Smith. Furthermore, Roth's imprecision reveals how even he, like the Jewish-American characters he creates, can confuse words with meaning.



## II

In *Portnoy's Complaint*, Portnoy's transgressive culinary and sexual appetite plainly signifies his oral fixation. At once, his mouth is a cultural vacuum and vent; he sucks up Gentile food and women while heartily blowing out the oral/sexual culture of his Jewish family. Portnoy's oral fixation and its previously explicated sexual implications continue in his incessant speech. The construction of the novel itself testifies to his nonstop talking; the entire book is a dramatic soliloquy of digressions about transgressions to his therapist, Dr. Spielvogel, ending in a theatrical verbal release of 96 A's and 4 H's: "Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa.....aaaaaaaaahhhh!!!!!" (*PC* 274). Like Portnoy's final exclamation, chronic masturbation and sexual obsession, the story of his life is one enormous ejaculation. His excessive orality gives way to linguistic exaggeration and the liberal use of obscenities; Portnoy spews verbal diarrhea, in ironic juxtaposition to his father's constipation. Amongst other names he gives himself, Portnoy claims he is "Alexander *Pornoise*"; this small, jocular observation is perhaps his only accurate self-analysis throughout his whole complaint (*PC* 269). But, whether he likes it or not, the noise in his head and irrepressibly splattering out of his mouth is an indicator of his Jewish upbringing. Portnoy compulsively talks about his mother, Sophie, an exaggerated Jewish Mother, whose own obsessive nagging, especially "during polio season," anticipates Portnoy's anxious drivel (*PC* 33). Portnoy describes her cross-examinations:

Open your mouth. Why is your throat red? Do you have a  
headache you're not telling me about? ...Is your neck stiff?  
Then why are you moving in that way? You ate like you

were nauseous, are you nauseous?...Your throat isn't sore is  
it? I can tell how you're swallowing...I want to take your  
temperature... (PC 33)

As if that account were not enough, Portnoy reiterates that “my mother would tell me—  
*and tell me*—and TELL ME—because nothing is ever said once—nothing!” (PC 99) And  
so, having been reared on oral dependency (now both alimentary and linguistic), Portnoy  
cannot stop opening his mouth.

The obvious talkativeness aside, Roth once again uses Portnoy's orality to expose  
his Jewish-American identity crisis and the cultural difference between his Jewish  
background and the America he wishes to penetrate. As a youth, Portnoy is always  
lusting after *shikse* girls and devising ways by which to fib about his origins. At the  
Irvington Park skating rink, a social spot teeming with “the middle-class charms” and the  
“sparkling eyes” of *shikses*, Portnoy concocts an elaborate monologue to seduce a *shikse*  
(PC 163). His come-on is linguistically centered, a farcical imitation of awkwardly  
perfect Gentile speech. He practices his address to the girl, saying, “Excuse me...but  
would you mind if I walk you home?” (PC 164). He then hesitates, and meaningfully  
ruminates, “[Is it] If I *walked* or if I *walk*—which is more correct? Because I have to  
speak absolutely perfect English. Not a word of Jew in it” (PC 164). Thus, young  
Portnoy understands how quickly and transparently any accented Jewish parlance would  
implicate his cultural origins. In turn, he also contrives a lie about his name, claiming it  
is “an old French name, a corruption of *porte noir*, meaning black door or gate.  
Apparently in the Middle Ages in France the door to our family manor house was  
painted” (PC 149). Portnoy imagines that a French name opens a secret door into

desired Gentile America, but then he nervously concludes to abandon his Jewish name altogether and practices, “my name is Al Parsons” or later “I am Alton Peterson” (*PC* 149, 164). He admits it is “a name I had picked for myself out of the Montclair section of the Essex County phone book—totally *goy* I was sure, and sounds like Hans Christian Andersen into the bargain...I am Alton Peterson, I am Alton Peterson...” (*PC* 164). Unfortunately, Portnoy is so linguistically preoccupied that he “reach[es] the edge of the lake with the tip of a skate a litter sooner than I had planned—and so go hurtling forward onto the frostbitten ground” (*PC* 164). Nevertheless, while Mr. Porte-Noir or Al Parsons or Alton Christian Peterson never materialize, Portnoy continues to classify himself and the desirable *shiksés* based on linguistic identifiers.

Since speech reveals cultural difference, Portnoy’s basic construal of the *shikse* women he dates comes from their verbal style and dialect. In college, Portnoy dates Kay Campbell, crudely nicknamed The Pumpkin (“in commemoration of her pigmentation and the size of her can”), a highly intelligent Mid-Western Gentile whom he still cannot believe, “*never raised her voice in an argument!*” (*PC* 216). When The Pumpkin brings Portnoy to her house for Thanksgiving, the tête-à-tête of the Campbell family dumbfounds Portnoy to the point of lunacy; he merely stutters, ““Thank you”” to everything, including dropped napkins, chairs and the floor (*PC* 220). The overly friendly, ‘folky’ speech begins with the Campbell’s greeting at the train station, at which The Pumpkin introduces ““Daddy, Mother”” to Portnoy, ““the weekend guest...the friend from school whom I wrote you about”” (*PC* 220). The language confounds Portnoy; he wonders, “What tongue is she speaking? I am ‘*the bonditt,*’ ‘*the vantz,*’” (*PC* 220). In his mind, Portnoy is not civilized and worthy enough to be a “weekend guest”; he only thinks

of himself in Jewish terms, as a *bonditt* (crook) or *vantz* (bedbug). These self-applied Yiddish labels expose his vandalization of America through ‘American’ girls; he is not part of the Campbell’s American linguistic culture and thus not part of the culture itself. After all, he cannot recover from the surprise of their dialogue, worrying what he should say next, “What then? Talk Yiddish?” (PC 224) Portnoy remains transfixed by their discourse and extols the Campbells for revealing that

the English language is a *form of communication!*

Conversation isn’t just crossfire where you 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!* (PC 222)

Portnoy associates “Jewish words” and his original Jewish dialogue as meaningless murderous weapons, effectively responsible for his marred self-identity (PC 96).

Conversely, what he conceives as the pure “English language” translates into linguistic and cultural freedom (PC 222).

Portnoy understands his cultural position through the mouth of yet another *shikse*, unforgettable Mary Jane Reed, better known as The Monkey for her sexual acrobatics. The uneducated, partially illiterate daughter of a West Virginia coal-miner, The Monkey’s family fuels the country, but her poverty and corresponding social status lower her on the American cultural ladder. She is an object of fascination to Portnoy, for she is a *shikse* who worships him despite his being Jewish. Through her, Portnoy understands the importance of his own oral fluency, for “this woman is uneducable and beyond reclamation. By contrast to hers, my childhood took place in Brahmin Boston” (PC 206).

Luckily for Portnoy, her sexual licentiousness and willingness to perform fellatio compensate for a lack of stimulating conversation. Thus to Portnoy's beaming appreciation, her sexual readiness corresponds to her verbal ineptitude. Specifically, the Rothian irony of the female mouth is that the greater oral fluency the woman has, the less likely she is to perform oral sex; vice versa, the more verbally impaired she is, the more willing she is to have oral sex. Thus, The Monkey's incompetence leaves her mouth open for Portnoy's pleasure.

Even if she cannot make the connection between verbal orality and sexual orality, Portnoy continues to do so. When she performs impromptu fellatio in the car, Portnoy instantly wonders, "What am I trying to communicate?" and then, as spontaneously as The Monkey's sexual performance, he declares, "'I know a poem...and I'm going to recite it'" (*PC* 191). Portnoy chooses the William Butler Yeats poem, "Leda and the Swan," a poem recounting Leda's rape by disguised Jupiter. The Monkey banally believes the erotically charged poem is Portnoy's self-composed come-on, but whether or not Portnoy himself understands the significance of this literary choice is unclear. Regardless, his impulsive reaction is analytically informative. The relationship between The Monkey's oral performance and Portnoy's oral recitation of a rape poem reveals two things. First, Portnoy hyper-sensitively compensates for The Monkey's 'dirty' mouth by reciting canonical poetry; even if he derives pleasure from her oral enthusiasm, he subconsciously offsets her garbled mouth with his educated mouth. Secondly, the content of the poem indicates his guilty feelings that he is taking advantage of her. Like his self-designation as a 'crook' or 'bedbug' with The Pumpkin, Portnoy, at least on a

subliminal level, understands that his conquest of *shikses* is a predatory and thieving enterprise.

Finally, through Portnoy's ultimate *shikse* liaison with "Supergoy" Sarah Abbot Maulsby, known to Portnoy as The Pilgrim, Portnoy admittedly appropriates American culture (PC 235). He directly confesses the connection between sexual and cultural penetration: "What I'm saying, Doctor, is that 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*" (PC 235). But The Pilgrim's turgid WASPiness and analogous speech is at odds with Portnoy's brand of Jewish culture and tongue. Simply, they reject each other based on oral (dis)taste. Portnoy rebuffs The Pilgrim's "cutesy-wootsy boarding school argot... 'barf' for vomit, 'ticked off' for angry, 'a howl' for funny, 'crackers' for crazy, 'teeny' for tiny. Oh, and 'divine'" (PC 233). Portnoy conveys her stiff inflection through italics, highlighting the snobbery of her overall character. When The Pilgrim becomes 'ticked off' with Portnoy's liberal use of the word "fuck," she patronizingly questions Portnoy, "Why *had* [Portnoy] to be so 'unattractive'? What possible pleasure had it given me (Portnoy) to be so 'ill-mannered'?" (PC 234) Naturally, The Pilgrim finds Portnoy's proclivity for oral sex even more distasteful than his oral obscenity. Portnoy grouses, "What [The Pilgrim] couldn't do was eat me...to suck my cock was beyond her" (PC 238). Particularly unlike The Monkey in every oral performance, The Pilgrim's stodgy oral scruples reflect her refusal to dispense oral pleasure to Portnoy.

Interestingly, Portnoy's numerous *shikse* affairs prove that he does not necessarily care what comes out of a *shikse's* mouth, he only cares about what (of his) goes into it.

For example, after receiving oral pleasure from The Monkey in public, he admits with rather supercilious irony that the brainless and verbally stunted Monkey “mastered me with her mouth” (*PC* 213). Portnoy’s inconsistency on the subject of oral satisfaction exposes his divided self. He cannot reconcile his guilted, sexually traditional Jewish aspect with the self-serving, sexually insatiable American aspect. Thus, his repeated attempts to derive oral satisfaction out of all sex confirm his paradoxical sexual (oral) rapaciousness and maternal oral dependency. Portnoy himself addresses his duality, questioning whether or not he overdoes his oral (sexual, gustatory, linguistic) fixation: “Do I exaggerate? Am I doing myself in only as a clever way of showing off? Or boasting perhaps? Do I really experience the restlessness, the horniness, as an affliction—or as an accomplishment? Both? Could be” (*PC* 113-14).

### III

In *American Pastoral*, Merry Levov’s linguistic handicap signals a greater cultural handicap; namely, her speech reflects her struggles to identify with a specific cultural group. A product of Jewish and Gentile lineage, Merry grows up without a grounded sense of a culture because her parents inhabit the American Dream, which is, in itself, a delusion. Simply, Merry cannot identify with her Jewish-American roots because her father has abandoned them before her. As a result, Merry is forced to identify with generic America, an American dreamland to which she intrinsically knows she does not belong. Feeling an inability to control her own life, Merry becomes a bastion of aggression against America and all who represent it. At first, Merry communicates her internal rage with a stutter. Later, Merry discharges her inner wrath, becoming a political radical whose homemade bombs eventually kill four people across the country. Merry’s

homicidal actions speak louder than her disconcerting stutter; that is, her external violence acts as a more effective outlet for her raging, superseding her speech impediment. Appropriately, the reader's first introduction to Merry, through her Uncle Jerry's conversation with Nathan Zuckerman, sets up Merry as an "unsatisfiable...monster" (*AP* 67). Merry's monstrous nature is a lifelong internal crisis in which her "rage is combustible"; indeed, like an insatiate fire, she consumes herself and her family from the inside out (*AP* 254). Zuckerman adeptly observes that Merry is quite literally "the burning subject" (*AP* 80). After all, she is "the daughter who transports [the Swede] out of the longed-for American pastoral and into everything that is its antithesis and its enemy, into the fury, violence, and the desperation of the counterpastoral—into the indigenous American berserk" (*AP* 86). Significantly, Merry begins this absolute devastation with her alarming stutter, a ticking bomb waiting to explode her father's illusory reality.

Merry's fascination with self-immolating monks in protest to the Vietnam War symbolizes her own burning inward strife. Unusually obsessed with this chilling act, Merry "got up early to see it on the morning news before she left for school...if she missed a self-immolation on the evening news" (*AP* 155). Zuckerman records that

She watched in total silence, as still as the monk at the center of the flames, and afterwards she would say nothing; even if [the Swede] spoke to her, questioned her, she just sat transfixed before that set for minutes on end, her gaze focused somewhere else than on the flickering screen, focused inward—inward where the coherence and the



certainty were supposed to be, where everything she did not know was initiating a gigantic upheaval. (*AP* 56)

Merry's inward gaze is a view to her own inferno; the burning monks function as an outward projection of her own internal blaze. She finds particular interest in the way in which the monks "somehow made it look as though flames, instead of assaulting him from without, were shooting forward into the air from within him...from his mouth...in an instantaneous eruption from his scalp and his face and his chest and his lap and his legs and his feet" (*AP* 153). The illusion of the fire burning from within is an emblematic image for Merry. Perceptively, the Swede speculates, "Was she imagining herself as one of those monks?" (*AP* 155) Alas, the Swede's worried conjecture is accurate: Merry identifies with the self-immolators, for her rage too burns within, gaining attention from without.

Rather than discovering an outlet for Merry's rage, the Levovs first try to smother it by extinguishing her stutter. In addition to seeing a speech therapist twice a week, Merry works with a psychiatrist, "who had a slant that made the Swede furious when he began to see Merry's struggle getting worse rather than better" (*AP* 95). Shortsightedly, the Swede believes Merry's stutter is a mere speech impediment, indicative of absolutely nothing else in her character. Conversely, the psychiatrist asserts that "the stutter was a choice she made, a way of being special that she had chosen and then locked into when she realized how well it worked" (*AP* 95). Unknowingly, Merry admits how she is "locked into" her stutter when she cries to her father, "'It's the same at school. It's the same with my friends. I get started with something and I can't stop. I just get c-c-c-carried aweh-awuh-awuh-awuh-awuh-awuh'" (*AP* 90). Still, the Swede refuses to

believe that “the etiology of Merry’s problem had largely to do with her having such good-looking and successful parents” (AP 96). The psychiatrist insists that she “chose to stigmatize herself with a severe stutter...to withdraw from the competition with her mother...thereby manipulating everyone from a point of seeming weakness” (AP 96). In fact, Merry’s impatient mother, Dawn, often instigates particularly memorable spouts of stuttering. Zuckerman observes, “Merry’s stuttering just killed her mother, and that killed Merry,” often triggering Merry to scream, “‘I’m not the problem, Mother is!’” (AP 90). Indeed, Merry’s frustrated exclamation supports the psychiatrist’s observation that Merry’s problem arises from her parents.

Nevertheless, the psychiatrist’s analysis fails to account for how severely Merry’s speech impediment plagues her; Zuckerman even compassionately remarks, “How hard she tried!” (AP 95). Merry diligently follows speech “strategies,” keeping a “stuttering diary” in which she records when and why she stutters throughout the day (AP 98). Then, Merry begins avoiding words altogether; for instance, when “she saw it coming, [she] started to go around it, would do anything, *anything*, to avoid the next word beginning with a *b*” (AP 99).<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, the psychiatrist’s analysis is neither wholly correct nor incorrect. Merry’s stutter undoubtedly stems from her parents, so in this way the psychiatrist is right; however, it is not a *choice* as the psychiatrist believes. An outgrowth of her parent’s cultural transgression, Merry “was simply in the hands of something she could not get out of” (AP 99). In other words, born into the American ideal of her parents, Merry is unable to exercise her right to make her own self-

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<sup>6</sup> Incoincidentally, Merry avoids *b* words, foreshadowing her disproportionate use of *bombs* later in life; so even unconsciously, Merry registers the volatile rage inside of her.

identifying choices, therefore she destroys their world, first with her stutter and then with the bomb.

Merry's solution to her stutter is political radicalism and violence. Turning her voice into a weapon, "the impediment became the machete with which to mow all the bastard liars down" (AP 100). As a teenager, Merry no longer works to eradicate her buckled speech; instead, she uses her voice as a threatening machine, obstinately defying popular political rhetoric and developing her own brand of threatening and hot politicking:

All her energy came right to the surface now, unimpeded, the force of resistance that had previously been employed otherwise; and by no longer bothering with the ancient obstruction, she experienced not only her full freedom for the first time in her life but the exhilarating power of total self-certainty. (AP 101)

Merry's now fully surfaced energy quickly begins to ignite her parents' discomfort. While the Swede naively assumes that Merry's irrepressible vehemence is "just a very crude kind of aggression," Dawn analyzes that "it's all from the stuttering isn't it?...She's angry because she stutters" (AP 103). In reality, Merry is not "angry because she stutters," she stutters *because* she is angry; in the same way, she vociferously antagonizes simply because she now releases her rage through an ironically effective voice. Specifically, Merry's stutter ensured that the content of her speech was never important before; however, when Merry renounces the significance of her stutter, her voice gains purpose and power:

...Merry concluded that what was deforming her life wasn't the stuttering, but the futile effort to overturn it...The ridiculous significance she had given to that stutter to meet the Rimrock expectations of the very parents and teacher and friends who had caused her to so overestimate something as secondary as the way she talked. Not what she said but how she said it was all that bothered them. And all she really had to do to be free of it was not to give a shit about how it made them so miserable when she had to pronounce the letter *b*. ...her stuttering was no longer going to be the center of her existence—and she made damn sure that it wasn't going to be the center of theirs. (*AP* 101)

Thus, all of Merry's rage unleashes when her mouth becomes her political microphone. As her mouth blasts forth words of anger and frustration, Merry also begins constructing homemade bombs. Notably, "that's when the stuttering first began to disappear. She never stuttered when she was with the dynamite" (*AP* 259). So, the more Merry externalizes her inward rage, the greater fluency she achieves. Yet, even if bombings help alleviate her speech impediment, their staccato blasts mimic her flaming, sputtering tongue. Ultimately, when she bombs Hamlin's General Store, Merry explodes the American Dream which suppressed her all of her life. It is as if Merry's conflicted inwardness detonates all at once, taking down her father's American Dream in the process.

Years after the deadly explosion, the Swede discovers the whereabouts of his fugitive daughter. Remarkably, he finds that Merry is now a Jain, thereby renouncing all actions that threaten the life of any living creature, which includes food, insects and even air particles. Merry now controls “unhampered, chantlike speech,” eerily claiming, “I am done with craving and selfhood” (AP 251). Interestingly, it takes a total renunciation of self for Merry to find fluency. Like the sharp explosions of her bombs, Merry burns out her rage and resigns to surrender her heated search for self-identity. In so doing, she slowly kills herself—for fear of injuring life, Merry barely eats and lives in abject squalor. In the end, however, Merry’s newfound pacifism does not silence the world she detonated. Merry’s stutter transfers itself onto the community and family she shatters; the repercussions of her wrathful actions are like the discomfiting echo of her consonants. In her wake, Merry leaves a trail of destruction wherein her traumatized family and, in particular, her father are left stuttering for answers. The Swede tragically muses over the polyvalent symbol of Merry’s speech:

He had been admitted into a mystery more bewildering  
even than Merry’s stuttering: there was no fluency  
anywhere. It was *all* stuttering. In bed at night, he pictured  
the whole of his life as a stuttering mouth and a grimacing  
face—the whole of his life without cause or sense and  
completely bungled. He no longer had any conception of  
order. There was no order. None. He envisioned his life  
as a stutterer’s thought, wildly out of his control. (AP 93)

Ultimately, through his daughter's muddled voice, the Swede can understand the disjointed American ethos, the chaos which is the true American reality.

## Roth's Plots

If Roth's lifetime writings concern the failed or partial assimilation of Jewish-Americans and the divided American-Jewish self, his latest novel, *The Plot Against America*, broadens his previous compositional themes. In this work, Roth rewrites history between the years of 1940 and 1942, imagining America under a fascist government led by Charles Lindbergh, venerated pilot turned President of the United States. A well-known Nazi sympathizer, Lindbergh first isolates the Jews, taking them out of their immigrant, cultural pockets such as Newark and relocating them outside cities. These fictitious Jews, now in the suburbs against their own will and culturally brainwashed by their non-Jewish neighbors, occupy the very setting that the real, historical Jews attempt to inhabit in the 1940s and '50s. Lindbergh's isolated Jews are now forced to assimilate; in the process, Roth illustrates their loss of cultural and individual power, their overwhelming sense of homelessness and psychic breakdowns. The forced assimilation does not work—"being relocated by fiat from a Jewish to an 'American' (i.e. gentile) community will not make one more of an American" (Coetzee 6). Hence, like the socio-economically driven assimilation of historical Jews, even a government-enforced assimilation in *The Plot Against America* is unsuccessful. Then, how are Roth's two accounts of assimilation different? No matter the means, Roth's 'real' and fictional Jews cannot carve out their own comfortable space in America. In his article in the *New York Review of Books*, J. M. Coetzee suggests, "in the starkest terms, that is what the plot of Roth's title is meant to achieve and, at the level of the imaginary, does achieve: to expel Jews from America. *Juden raus*. That is what Philip cannot

forget” (6). Thus, in Roth’s lifetime litero-analysis of the conflicts of Jewish-American assimilation, assimilated American Jews are always alien in the American home and unable to find their authentic Jewish home. Moreover, Roth seemingly concludes in this latest novel that a unified Jewish and American identity is not only imaginary, but equal to a metaphysical ‘Final Solution’. Hence, Roth’s Jewish-Americans are defined by their division; without this split identity, they are homeless, they are nothing.

In his writings, Roth asks what it takes to be both Jewish and American, investigating the cultural split-personality that the dual Jewish-American identity both tragically and comically engenders. When Roth communicates the various Jewish-American ‘selves’ through the cultural identifiers of competition, food and language, he shows the complexity of the Jewish ‘condition.’ The cultural markers I have described in this thesis play out the division itself and the concurrent desire and resistance to assimilation. Ironically, while these cultural identifiers point out the bifurcation of Jewish-Americanism, Roth’s characters consciously and unconsciously use them as means to express or attempt American assimilation and the correlated pursuit of the American Dream. In the name of assimilation, the characters actually divide themselves, fractured by the competing cultural tensions of a Jewish and an American identification. So, the cultural identifiers analyzed here are contradictory devices that simultaneously bring about cultural togetherness and othering. The result, Roth shows us, is a consistently partial assimilation of Jewish-Americans into American life; of course, in *The Plot Against America*, Roth demonstrates the menace and consistent impossibility of the Jewish to American conversion. Ultimately, Roth understands the dangers and desires of Jewish-American assimilation; hence, reaching for American assimilation yet



innately bound to their culture of birth, Roth's Jewish-Americans are chronically dichotomous, split by the two cultures and split open for view by Roth.

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