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## **“the impossible that is going to happen”: The Denial of Death in Roth’s Zuckerman Books**

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The University of Southern Mississippi

“the impossible that is going to happen”: The Denial of Death in Roth’s Zuckerman  
Books

by

Matthew Germenis

A Thesis  
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## ABSTRACT

Since Philip Roth's official retirement from fiction writing after the publication of his last novel in 2010, scholars have embarked on a major reassessment of Roth's oeuvre. This analysis is a reassessment of Roth's Nathan Zuckerman series, which includes nine novels beginning with *The Ghost Writer* (1979) and ending in *Exit Ghost* (2007). While much has been written on *The Ghost Writer* and its inclusion of a character that is believed to be Anne Frank, scholars have overlooked the beginning of a major theme in Roth's work. The emphasis is often placed on Roth's engagement with history, the Holocaust, and the ethics surrounding the appropriation of Anne Frank's persona. However, my research examines the role that the denial of death plays in the Zuckerman novels, which are introduced immediately in *The Ghost Writer*, including how Nathan's identity as Jewish and as a writer is influenced by the problem of death. Zuckerman's difficulty in accepting death is prominent throughout *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981), *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), *The Prague Orgy* (1985), and *The Counterlife* (1986), the subsequent novels in the series. The analysis ends with a discussion of *American Pastoral* (1997), where I argue that Zuckerman manipulates his role as narrator and tricks the reader into forgetting about his presence in order to ignore the reality of death. My interpretation offers a unique and holistic approach to reading the Zuckerman series by introducing an expansion of previous scholarship to the nine novels and an entirely new lens (the denial of death) through which we can reread the entirety of Roth's oeuvre.

Key Words: Philip Roth, Nathan Zuckerman, denial of death, Jewish-American identity

Dedication

*for Rachael, always*

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## Introduction: Enter Ghost

In Woody Allen's *God (A Play)*, a character named Writer laments, "I want to be immortal. I don't want to just die and be forgotten. I want my works to live on long after my physical body has passed away. I want future generations to know I existed!" (Allen 154). That the character is named "Writer," and that he should be feeling this, is, of course, no coincidence. In the face of death, the writer hopes that his works will outlast him and establish a legacy to compensate for his death. The writer uses his art to combat this fear of mortality.

One way that a writer can compensate for his death is to manipulate the narrative in order to trick the reader into forgetting about the death of the narrator. This is what happens to Philip Roth's Nathan Zuckerman, the main character and narrator of nine of his twenty-nine novels. Beginning with *The Ghost Writer* (1979) and ending with *Exit Ghost* (2007), Zuckerman's maturation as a writer<sup>1</sup> engages the problem of death; through this character, according to Roth, literature ensures immortality through the creation of ghosts. Roth implies that literature's creation of ghost stories allows for immortality. By analyzing these nine Zuckerman novels as a ghost story, then, the reader finds that they describe the story of Nathan as a ghost-to-be. Said another way, they show that the narrator, Nathan, and the author, Roth, must eventually come to an end and die. Yet their death is not an end for both the author and the character will also become

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<sup>1</sup> Clotilde Landais divides the Zuckerman novels according to Nathan's affiliation with two literary traditions: the Sacred Fount and the Ivory Tower. The former tradition implicates the writer experiencing as much as possible, "living more" to inform his work. The latter tradition places the writer above life itself, making the writer more of an observer than an active participant in life experiences. Landais suggests that the *Zuckerman Bound* tetralogy posits Zuckerman working in the Sacred Fount tradition, while the *American Trilogy* has Zuckerman in the Ivory Tower – observing the lives of others (243).



specters. The presence of both men, in these novels, outlasts their bodies. As a result, the nine Zuckerman novels also become a tale of the struggle with corporeality.

This thesis examines Zuckerman's personal difficulty in accepting death as something that will inevitably happen to him. Before I focus on some of the novels in more detail, though, let me first offer a quick summary of their narrative arc. Through the series of nine novels, Zuckerman challenges, and expects to overcome, the inexorability of death with his mastery and manipulation of narrative. In the novels Zuckerman narrates display the writer's inability to accept mortality. He uses various tricks and techniques to overcome it, hoping that it is somehow possible to cheat death. In the end, he partly succeeds by becoming a ghost<sup>2</sup>, literature's solution to the problem of the corporeality.

Beginning with *The Ghost Writer* (1979), Roth's narrator is a young and ambitious Nathan Zuckerman, eager to establish himself in the public world of literature. In this novel, Nathan calls into being one of Jewish history's most famous ghosts. He resurrects one of the key figures of the twentieth century: Anne Frank. The novel shows that Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl* itself, as a work of literature, allowed her to defeat death and live forever through literature. Her words somehow compensate for her

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<sup>2</sup> In "Surviving What Haunts You: The Art of Invisibility in *Ceremony*, *The Ghost Writer*, and *Beloved*," Naomi R. Rand discusses the use of ghosts in various ethnic-American literatures, represented by the aforementioned novels. Rand notes, "The ghost, a figure that returns to haunt or bargain with those who survive, is a natural bridge between the worlds of the living and the dead. Morrison, Roth, and Silko give their ghosts both human and feminine form in order to create an other who is capable of intimacy, compassion, and finally acceptance or even capitulation" (22). When applied to *The Ghost Writer*, this theory implicates that Zuckerman's attraction to Amy Bellette provides a greater incentive to understanding her and her story, which Zuckerman imagines to be the story of an Anne Frank who never perished in the Holocaust. To use Rand's terminology, the intimacy between Bellette and Zuckerman is a way to become closer to the past, to the world of the dead and all of their stories.

death. Amy Bellette<sup>3</sup>, the young girl that Zuckerman imagines to be Anne Frank<sup>4</sup>, articulates this desire to resurrect the dead through literature:

Her responsibility was to the dead, if to anyone – her sister, her mother, to all the slaughtered schoolchildren who had been her friends. There was her diary’s purpose, there was her ordained mission: to restore in print their status as flesh and blood...for all the good that would do them. (*Ghost* 147)

Haunted by the ghost<sup>5</sup> of Anne Frank, using her diary as his example, the youthful, narcissistic Zuckerman thinks that he, too, can accomplish this feat of immortality, of raising the dead, by writing his own story. As it happens, Nathan does write his story, *Carnovsky*, a book so scandalous that his brother Henry blames Nathan’s book for the death of their father due to its explicit nature and the shame it casts on the family.

The next two Zuckerman novels, *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981) and *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), depict the death of Nathan’s father. In them, Nathan is a kind of narrative ghost because they use an objective third-person narrator. That narrator allows the reader to witness the fear and inevitability of death without Zuckerman’s narrative tampering.

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<sup>3</sup> Rachael McLennan’s “Enabling Fictions: Philip Roth’s Prosthetic Anne Franks” is an analysis of the role Frank plays in Roth’s work, focusing on the different representations of her in postwar American culture. On Amy Bellette’s character in *The Ghost Writer*, McLennan writes, “If an identity as Anne Frank functions as narrative prosthesis for Zuckerman, explaining the ‘deviance’ of Amy Bellette’s body, in Zuckerman’s fantasy ‘Amy Bellette’ also functions as a narrative prosthesis, enabling Anne Frank to cope with the trauma of the Holocaust and begin a new existence in America...’Amy Bellette’ enables Zuckerman’s Anne Frank to ‘de-emphasize’ the ‘difference’ with which she feels the Holocaust has marked her. Yet Amy’s assertion that “I have to be dead to everyone”, that she cannot reveal herself as Anne Frank, reveals that after the production of the Broadway play, Anne Frank’s cultural image and iconic status relied upon her death, as many critics have noted” (256).

<sup>4</sup> Rand discusses Zuckerman’s desire for Amy Bellette and his survivor guilt, and that “Rather than simply relating the past, and hoping to edify, Roth and his hero, Zuckerman, have transformed his guilt into a physical presence. Zuckerman can court this woman who he tells us is Anne Frank revived, comes to terms with her as a self-creation, and then deny her. By telling this story within a story, by inflating his guilt so that it takes on human form, Zuckerman creates a direct link to his past and to the cultural heritage of the shtetl” (26).

<sup>5</sup> Charles Berryman notes, “Nathan Zuckerman may appear in Roth’s fiction as a Jewish novelist from Newark, but his concerns about family, sex, guilt, and the creation of literature are haunted by the ghost of Stephen Dedalus...Roth’s own contribution to modernism thus began when he learned how to combine the expression of forbidden passion and the graphic memory of childhood” (178). All of these themes are essential to Frank’s diary, showing a literary tradition that includes James Joyce, Anne Frank, and Roth.

They also render Nathan into a kind of ghostly presence. In *Zuckerman Unbound*, the first of these novels, Nathan suffers from the problem of celebrity after the publication of his controversial *Carnovsky*. The trauma that Nathan experiences in *Unbound* psychosomatically manifests itself in the form of chronic, un-diagnosable, and unbearable pain, severe to the point of turning Zuckerman into a drug addict. Throughout the novel, Zuckerman is at war with his own body. Its inexplicable chronic pain and increasingly visible decay is one example of many in Roth's work in which the body, far from a sacred temple, is instead an essential reminder that we all must perish. It is also evidence that something beyond the body – a ghost – will be necessary to achieve immortality.

In the fourth Zuckerman book *The Prague Orgy* (the epilogue to a complete *Zuckerman Bound* tetralogy), Nathan is in Prague to secure the unpublished manuscripts belonging to the deceased father of an acquaintance. That he wants to retrieve and publish these manuscripts from dead writers returns Nathan to the ghostly presence of dead authors that somehow exist in books. It is a lesson he learned from Anne Frank<sup>6</sup> in *The Ghost Writer* and one he now applies to literature more generally. By rescuing these manuscripts and publishing them, Nathan believes literature can prevent the writer from ever truly dying. The book's narrative is derived from Zuckerman's notebooks, which depict his need to write his account of his Prague adventures in locating the lost manuscripts. In both his own notebooks, and in the unpublished manuscripts of the writer

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<sup>6</sup> Spargo writes of another tradition that Zuckerman inherits from Frank: "Nathan, like Anne Frank before him, has been trying to declare himself independent of his parents' generation of American Jews and their mores, and Judge Wapter's intervention tries to resolve Nathan's crisis of Jewish identity by way of reference to the Broadway stage" (112). On the Broadway adaptation of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, Spargo recapitulates the observations noted in an issue from *Commentary*, in which "Algene Ballif argued that the Broadway play had turned Anne Frank into a stock heroine of stage and screen, someone who goes through the motions of love with Peter as if she were enjoying the performance. Ballif objected to an Anne who had become a caricatured combination child-woman, and this dramatic effect may have been as much the result of Broadway and Hollywood conventions that frequently stereotyped and infantilized feminine desire as any willful misreading of the *Diary*" (99).

literature preserves the memory and the experience of what is otherwise dead or dying. By depicting Nathan's own notebooks, the novel returns to the idea of literary immortality first raised by Nathan's mediation on Anne Frank's diary in the first Zuckerman novel.

Now that the problem of relying on literature, on text, on words to establish immortality is raised, the next Zuckerman novel, *The Counterlife* (1986), shows the danger of words, texts, and stories. This novel features Zuckerman (and Roth) at his most dizzying and masterful. Specifically, it contains a text within a text. In the novel, the reader finds a narrative where Zuckerman and his brother Henry are both dead and alive, depending on the section of the novel. Whereas the first chapter has Nathan's brother Henry die on the operating table during open-heart surgery, the subsequent chapter has Nathan going to retrieve Henry who absconds to Israel and becomes a radical Zionist. Nathan's writerly struggle continues as a later chapter in the novel reveals to the reader that the book we are reading, *The Counterlife*, is actually the title of Zuckerman's unpublished and final work. We discover that Nathan is the one that dies on the operating table, and it is Henry who uncovers Nathan's manuscript, *The Counterlife*, which transposes Nathan's health issues onto his brother. Because Nathan is unable to confront his eventual death, he turns to fiction to extend his life and keep the ghosts at bay.

Following the narrative confusion of *The Counterlife*, *American Pastoral* (1997), leaves Nathan Zuckerman almost entirely out of the story. The majority of the novel consists of a quasi-biography of his childhood hero, Seymour "Swede" Levov. In this story, Zuckerman diverts our attention away from his own brush with death after a battle with prostate cancer to the life, downfall, and eventual demise of his childhood hero. In

this novel, Zuckerman pulls off his most successful trick thus far – he avoids his own death by leaving the narrative entirely.

Such is the narrative arc of the nine Zuckerman novels that take Nathan Zuckerman from youth to old age and prostate cancer. Death and the fear of death form the novels' principal subject and that through literature, specifically fiction, the main character, and even Roth himself, makes a case for immortality through the use of the literary figure of the ghost. In order to explicate Roth's treatment of death and the implications of Zuckerman's denial of mortality, a theoretical approach is essential. In the psychoanalytical tradition of Freud, Ernest Becker, in *The Denial of Death* (1973), analyzes the ways in which we avoid and struggle with the reality of death. Becker writes, "Of all the things that move man, one of the principal ones is his terror of death...heroism is first and foremost a reflex of the terror of death. We admire most the courage to face death; we give such valor our highest and most constant adoration" (11). But for Becker, an individual's heroic acts in the face of death are merely veiled attempts to conquer the impossible. Man as an animal is just as afraid of death as all other animals, but man is the only animal that has the capability to recognize his inevitable demise, as well as the option to repress that fear, to deny it. Becker states,

[the] fear of death is universally present...the fear of death must be present behind all our normal functioning, in order for the organism to be armed toward self-preservation...Animals in order to survive have had to be protected by fear-responses, in relation not only to other animals but to nature itself. They had to see the real relationship of their limited powers to the dangerous world in which they were immersed. Reality and fear go together naturally. (Becker 17)

According to Becker, the fear of death is both ubiquitous and the primary force that motivates all animals, including people. Conscious of death's inevitability and the

onslaught of decay, animals are always fearful, and thus seek ways to ensure their permanence and self-perseveration. Writers find the path to immortality in cultural memory through literature. In order to understand the character development of Nathan Zuckerman in Roth's body of work, we must understand the role that the terror of death plays throughout the novels in which Zuckerman either narrates or is featured.

My research draws from Roth's archive at the Library of Congress, which includes his notes and early drafts of *The Ghost Writer*, *The Anatomy Lesson*, *The Counterlife*, and correspondence between Roth and others. This research allows me to see just how fundamental to the Zuckerman novels is the conflict between the living and the memories of the dead. In the archive, Roth wrestles with traditions and the legacy passed on, sometimes undesirably, to the subsequent generations.

My thesis, then, does more than just offer a new reading of Roth's Zuckerman novels, it also offers an angle that can be applied to the entirety of his oeuvre, one which seeks to understand the oldest of conflicts – man's battle with mortality. Many things haunt Roth's body of work; this study is simply a telling of these ghost stories.

## “Just because of the dead?": Zuckerman in the 80s

*Zuckerman Unbound* (1981)

Roth's sequel to *The Ghost Writer*, *Zuckerman Unbound*, follows Nathan Zuckerman as he deals with the celebrity that followed from his publishing of *Carnovsky* in the early 70s. Alvin Pepler, a former quiz show contestant from the 1950s, who harasses Zuckerman, and threatens to kidnap and murder Nathan's mother unless he pays Pepler \$50,000. Much like Roth's own *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), Zuckerman's *Carnovsky* is fiction disguised as confession, a monologue spoken on an analyst's couch in which the intimate and explicit details of the titular character's irrepressible libido leads to the public's misperception that the novel is autobiography under the guise of fiction. Nathan Zuckerman is wrongly accused of being Gilbert Carnovsky; Roth is wrongly accused of being Zuckerman<sup>7</sup>. *Carnovsky* is seen as pornographic, anti-Semitic, misogynistic, and masturbatory (pun intended), and of course these labels are also attributed to Zuckerman. The notoriety of the book results in media attention for Zuckerman's parents—the press wants to know what it is like for Selma Zuckerman to be “Carnovsky's mother?” (*Unbound* 64). Whereas Nathan's mother seems fine with dealing with reporters and the nation-wide controversy caused by her son's book, Zuckerman's father, who is recovering from a stroke in a nursing home, slowly

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<sup>7</sup> In an interview with Hermione Lee, Roth says, “Nathan Zuckerman is an act. It's all the art of impersonation, isn't it? That's the fundamental novelistic gift. Zuckerman is a writer who wants to be a doctor impersonating a pornographer. I am a writer writing a book impersonating a writer who wants to be a doctor impersonating a pornographer – who then, to compound the impersonation, to barb the edge, pretends he's a well-known literary critic. Making fake biography, false history, concocting a half-imaginary existence out of the actual drama of my life is my life. There has to be some pleasure in this job, and that's it. To go around in disguise. To act a character. To pass oneself off as what one is not. To *pretend*” (166-167).

succumbing to dementia, is not as physically able to withstand the shame and embarrassment.

*Zuckerman Unbound* concludes with the death of Nathan's father, Dr. Victor Zuckerman. The novel's third-person perspective allows the reader to witness Nathan's struggle to deny the reality of his father's death. We learn that Victor Zuckerman accepted his mortality many years prior to the events of the novel. We also discover that he purchased two grave plots, one for himself and for his wife, at the same time he purchased their retirement home (*Unbound* 193). However, unlike his father, Nathan cannot so easily prepare for, much less accept death. For instance, during his father's funeral Nathan becomes deeply self-conscious as the author of *Carnovsky*, and recalls his father's last word to him, "Bastard," which was said directly into Nathan's eyes.

During the funeral, while the rabbi is speaking over Dr. Zuckerman's open grave, Nathan, disturbed in the face of death, becomes aware of the age of everyone attending; minus himself, his brother, and the rabbi, the rest of the attendees are senior citizens. Realizing they will all soon die, he avoids meditating on this, and instead focuses on the fact that no one there has mentioned the controversial nature of *Carnovsky*. It cannot be due to some sense of politeness. He decides it must be due to the likelihood that their working-class lives had not allowed for any time even to read it, much less enjoy any book. Afraid to think about death, attempting to avoid it, I believe he began to think of his own book because he wishes to defy death through immortality, which he hopes he can attain through his novels. The funeral proves that he was wrong. He cannot achieve immortality if no one ever reads his books. Roth writes,

Of all the obstacles in life that these retired salesmen and merchants and manufacturers had struggled with and overcome, reading through a book was not



yet one. Just as well. Not even the young rabbi made mention of *Carnovsky* to the author. Perhaps out of respect for the dead. All the better. He was not there as “the author” – the author was back in Manhattan. Here he was Nathan. Sometimes life offers no more powerful experience than just such a divestment. (*Unbound* 194-95)

Nathan realizes at the funeral that literature will not get him out of death. As a result, he decides to divest himself of the burden of literature, and to face the fact that he too will die. At the funeral, he can no longer avoid contemplating his own death. Nonetheless, Zuckerman retains his writer’s dependency on words. At his father’s grave, he even prays: “He recited the Mourner’s Kaddish. Over a sinking coffin, even a nonbeliever needs some words to chant, and ‘*Yisgadal v’yiskadash...*’ made more sense to him than ‘Rage against the dying of the light’” (*Unbound* 195). The confrontation with death requires Zuckerman to choose the traditional Jewish prayer for the dead instead of the verse of Dylan Thomas, which he had expected to recite.

When Zuckerman recites the mourner’s Kaddish he resurrects the ghost of his own Jewish tradition – the prayer, like a ghost, like Anne Frank’s diary, haunts him and ultimately makes its presence known despite his best efforts to repress it. If one reads the mourner’s Kaddish in this novel as a ghost, the ghost of Jewish tradition, then, Nathan’s recital of it becomes a key moment in our understanding of Zuckerman.

In reciting the prayer, he overcomes his lifelong struggle to avoid being pigeonholed as a Jewish-American writer. The confrontation with death is powerful enough to make secular Nathan resort to an essentially Jewish literature, a method of achieving immortality, or at least, a tradition that has defeated death for several millennia. Forced to confront death, Nathan describes his emotions, “The strain of feeling no grief. The surprise. The shame. The exultation. The shame of that. But all the grieving over his

father's body had taken place when Nathan was twelve and fifteen and twenty-one; the grief over all his father had been dead to while living. From that grief the death was a release" (*Unbound* 197). In an interview after the publication of *Patrimony* (1991), a memoir that recounts his own father's battle with cancer and subsequent death, Roth echoes Zuckerman's surprise concerning his own father:

What surprised me the most? I'm not being clever: that he died. All the words that we spoke to each other and to the doctors, and the words that I wrote down, all of them are, finally, just that, words. The experience itself is another thing entirely. His death didn't happen in the universe of words. Perhaps those of us who live with and by words are a bit astonished by the real thing because we are always looking for the right to describe the thing. We assume that if we find the right word, we've captured the thing. The words become a substitute for the thing. But the thing is something different. (Sanoff 267-68)

Ernest Becker writes, "there is nothing like shocks in the real world to jar loose repressions" (Becker 21), and it is clear that both Roth and Zuckerman admit to their surprise at the death of their fathers. The fear of death is something that has been repressed in order for the mind to function on a relatively healthy level – constant awareness of the terror inflicted by one's end has maddening consequences. But the death of his father is powerful enough to make Zuckerman aware of mortality as something real for him, too. All of the words written about death, or for the purpose of escaping death, become, as Roth says, merely words after the actual moment of life's extinguishing. A writer, no matter how great, not even one with the level of mastery over his craft like Zuckerman, can prevent the decaying of the body and deny the absolute truth that is our death.

However, for all the immortality offered by the Jewish prayer by the end of this novel, Zuckerman is unwilling to see its potential for him. *Zuckerman Unbound* ends

with Zuckerman's life in shambles: his father deceased, his mother alone, and his brother blaming him for the death of their father. In addition to family tragedy, paranoia and the consequences of celebrity take their toll on Zuckerman and his fiction. As we will see in the third Zuckerman book, *The Anatomy Lesson*, Nathan learns that the permanence of literature is no match for the decay of the body. The aftermath of the corporeal crisis that Zuckerman faces in this next book is so severe that despite his future attempts to write, Nathan fails to publish another novel after *Carnovsky*. His efforts to resurrect more literary ghosts/ghosts through literature result in nothing more than unpublished manuscripts, written by him or someone else.

#### *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983)

*The Anatomy Lesson* follows Nathan just after his father's death, depicted in *Zuckerman Unbound*. Unable to continue writing fiction, Zuckerman decides to give up the writerly life in favor of returning to the University of Chicago in order to attend medical school and eventually become a doctor. The life of a doctor, the life of Nathan's father, is one that results in something tangible; a means to help others in a way that Nathan does not feel is being accomplished by his fiction. This conflict between the writer's mind and body results in Zuckerman's disavowal of the literary life. Throughout the novel, meanwhile, Zuckerman struggles with an un-diagnosable illness that all but paralyzes him, thus making it painful to write. Zuckerman's chronic pain leads to an addiction to multiple prescription painkillers and marijuana. In this novel, then, the body

takes over for Zuckerman and no ghost, of either his father, Jewish history, of the Jewish tradition, arises to offer him a glimpse of immortality.

In an astute reading of the importance of the body to thoughts of death, Ernest Becker writes: “The body, then, is one’s animal fate that has to be struggled against in some ways. At the same time, it offers experiences and sensations, concrete pleasure that the inner symbolic world lacks” (Becker 44). Using Freudian theory, Becker discusses the taboo of bodily functions and secretions as a denial of the human body as something natural, and therefore susceptible to decay. This sacrosanct image of the body is one of the images that Roth’s work seeks to destroy. Emphasis of the corporeal, mainly through sexuality, is Roth’s way of reminding his readers that their bodies decay with every second that passes. People, Roth’s novels insist, like every other animal in existence, are subject to the problems and pleasures that come with possessing a body. This, I believe, is the “anatomy lesson” referred to in the title of the third Zuckerman novel.

Zuckerman’s quarrel with corporeality reaches its climax near the end of this novel when Nathan accompanies Mr. Freytag, the father of a friend, to a Jewish cemetery so that he may visit his deceased wife. While there, Nathan succumbs to the excessive amount of drugs and painkillers that he takes to combat his chronic pain. Zuckerman, drugged out, attacks Freytag due to his incessant complaining about his ungrateful son. Out of respect for the deceased, Freytag cries out, “Zuck, no – Zuck, the dead!” Nathan replies, “We are the dead! These bones in boxes are the Jewish living! These are the people running the show!” (*Anatomy* 262). Though he is under the influence of numerous drugs, a literary ghost once again overwhelms Zuckerman. In this case, history, the memory of the dead, and Judaic tradition (religious and cultural) as ghosts are said to

haunt him. According to him, they dictate the behavior of an individual in the present. The dead, as ghosts, are overbearing to Zuckerman.

An early version of this scene is depicted in the first draft of *The Anatomy Lesson*. Roth writes,

On the road to the cemetery, what is there to think, whether stupefied or wide-awake, other than that death is dreadful? That was Zuckerman's only thought. His hatred for living in pain was nothing to his hatred of death. Yet it would come. You could drink all the vodka in the world, but it kept coming. No – it stayed out of sight, and you came to it. You descend into illness and from there you find death... You and your body are one. Pain teaches that, and so does pleasure. (Box 52, Folder 2)

Here we see the conflict between man and the body, both decaying and allowing us to feel pleasure that Becker identified. Because the body implies mortality, Zuckerman's psychosomatic chronic pain stands for his struggle with death. Roth develops the relationship between Zuckerman's pain and mortality, which can be seen in slight changes in the second draft of the novel. In the published version, Roth finds a more succinct manner of conveying Zuckerman's meditations on dying. Sickness, Zuckerman's ceaseless pain, is the body's reminder to the individual that it is decaying. In the final version of *The Anatomy Lesson*, Roth adds: "Illness is a message from the grave. Greetings: You and your body are one – it goes, you follow. His parents were gone and he was next. Out to the cemetery in a long black car. No wonder Mr. Freytag had fallen back in alarm: all that was missing was the box" (*Anatomy* 254). In the first drafts, though, Zuckerman notes, "Sickness is a message from death" (Box 52, Folder 6).

Zuckerman rarely, if ever, directly confronts death in the novels that he narrates<sup>8</sup>. When death is discussed in these novels, it almost always refers to someone else's death. Dying is something that only happens to other people, according to Zuckerman. *The Anatomy Lesson* ends with Nathan's inability to write, and therefore unable to further solidify his place in the literary canon (i.e. immortality). However, the coda to *Zuckerman Bound* depicts Zuckerman's attempt to once again "resurrect" the literary ghosts of others, as he did in *The Ghost Writer*, to continue denying his own death. But in order to accomplish this, Zuckerman must travel to Prague.

#### *The Prague Orgy* (1985)

In *The Anatomy Lesson*, Zuckerman had determined to combat death as a doctor. That novel, though, charts his physical breakdown, as well as his discovery that he cannot write fiction, he has writer's block, and so cannot combat death. In the next Zuckerman novel, however, he has forsaken his plans to be a doctor. Instead, he seems to have learned from his experience of various traditional ghosts – Anne Frank's diary, the Kaddish – that other people's writings can somehow grant him immortality through some

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<sup>8</sup> In the aforementioned interview with Lee, Roth is asked if he frees himself by writing about Zuckerman in the third person: "I free myself to say about Zuckerman what it would be inappropriate for him to say about himself in quite the same way. The irony would be lost in the first person, or the comedy; I can introduce a note of gravity that might be jarring coming from him. The shifting within a single narrative from the one voice to the other is how a reader's moral perspective is determined. It's something like this that we all want to do in ordinary conversation when we employ the indefinite pronoun 'one' in speaking of ourselves. Using 'one' places your observation in a looser relationship to the self that's uttering it. Look, sometimes it's more telling to let him speak for himself, sometimes it's more telling to speak about him; sometimes it's more telling to narrate obliquely, sometimes not. *The Ghost Writer* is narrated in the first person, probably because what's being described is largely a world Zuckerman's discovered outside of himself, the book of a young explorer. The older and more scarred he gets, the more *inward-looking* he gets, the further out *I* have to get. The crisis of solipsism he suffers in *The Anatomy Lesson* is better seen from a distance" (182-183).

kind of connection to them. In *The Prague Orgy*, then, Zuckerman determines to rescue the unpublished manuscripts of a Yiddish writer in Soviet-controlled Czechoslovakia. Rather than save himself through fiction, or others through medicine, Nathan Zuckerman will now rescue lost lives by rescuing forgotten manuscripts from the Holocaust<sup>9</sup>. In a narrative turn, the entirety of *The Prague Orgy* is written as if it had been taken from Zuckerman's diary.

In the course of his journey to rescue this manuscript, Nathan once again encounters Anne Frank<sup>10</sup>. She is again resurrected, of sorts, except this time it is under the guise of theatre and performance. While in a restaurant, Zuckerman thinks,

I am remembering the actress Eva Kalinova and how they have used Anne Frank as a whip to drive her from the stage, how the ghost of the Jewish saint has returned to haunt her as a demon. Anne Frank as a curse and a stigma... Had Eva Kalinova been born in New Jersey she too would have wished that Anne Frank had never died as she did; but coming, like Anne Frank, from the wrong continent at the wrong time, she could only wish that the Jewish girl and her little diary had never existed" (*Prague* 61).

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<sup>9</sup> In her influential essay, "How to Tell a True Ghost Story: *The Ghost Writer* and the Case of Anne Frank," Aimee Pozorski writes on the issue of whether or not Roth should be read as a Holocaust novelist, considering the ways in which Frank haunts his work: "Despite Zuckerman's lengthy Anne Frank fantasy and its suspension of any simple reading of *The Ghost Writer* as a bildungsroman, very few critics are willing to classify Philip Roth as a Holocaust novelist. Of those who consider Roth's unique brand of Holocaust representation, Sophia Lehmann proposes that 'Roth presents fantasy as a positive force for creatively reimagining the Holocaust in ways that challenge established historical truisms and dogma' (360). Sanford Pinsker similarly considers Roth's relationship with the imaginative force of the Holocaust, suggesting that 'for all of *The Ghost Writer*'s technical brilliance, the question still nags: how to imagine the Holocaust, or in this case, how to reimagine Anne Frank?' (231). However, both Lehmann and Pinsker focus their readings on the power of the imagination in confronting historical atrocity, as if reality is perhaps too stark or somehow not enough for the source of a novel. By contrast, Nathan Zuckerman's fantasizing about Anne Frank's 'ghost' suggests, as has Cynthia Ozick, that reality it always sacrificed on the altar of communal ideals. In other words, Nathan imagines Anne Frank as alive in order to destroy her as an icon of Jewishness, thereby allowing a truer account of Jewish experience to arise" (90).

<sup>10</sup> R. Clifton Spargo's essay on Anne Frank and cultural memory in Roth's work, states, "cultural memory lends itself to the distorting tendencies of the predominant ideology in which it is situated. For as it distorts the literal event it remembers (much in the same manner that fiction does), cultural memory most often fails to recognize its own distortions. And thus a further result of this failure is that cultural memory reifies ideology and the mythic distortions produced by ideology" (89). While Spargo is more concerned with *The Ghost Writer*, and therefore the Holocaust and Anne Frank in American cultural memory, the same applies to *The Prague Orgy* and the cultural memory of the Holocaust in the Czech Republic.

Alexis Kate Wilson discusses the ghosts that haunt Zuckerman throughout the *Zuckerman Bound* tetralogy. She notes the similar convention of Nathan's using a diary even as he meditates on Frank's *Diary*. Wilson's observation is that whereas Anne Frank's story was ended for her by her death, Zuckerman, on the verge of death at the end of *The Anatomy Lesson* only begins to take control of his life when he takes control of his narrative in this, his own diary<sup>11</sup>. Nathan, Wilson writes, resolves the dilemma, "embodied at times by Anne Frank," of coinciding the writer's life with the life of a writer (Wilson 108).

If we view the *Zuckerman Bound* series as the growth of Nathan's mastery over fiction, then *The Ghost Writer* is Zuckerman's earliest dominion over his narrative; *Zuckerman Unbound* and *The Anatomy Lesson* comprise the phase of awkward adolescence, as Nathan's voice struggles to undermine that of the third-person limited narrative. In *The Prague Orgy*, readers arrive at the moment where Zuckerman's ability as a storyteller finally comes to fruition.

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<sup>11</sup> In *The Major Phases of Philip Roth*, David Gooblar discusses Roth's portrayal and use of Anne Frank, stating that she "can truly be seen as a ghost writer haunting these authors' pages [Roth and Zuckerman], a Jewish writer whose masterpiece will forever be defined by the cataclysm that extinguished her life and continues to haunt ours. Although, on the surface, it appears that Roth's use of Anne Frank and his notable use of Kafka employs very similar mechanisms of imagined return, it is clear that these two figures have served Roth's work in different ways...He seems less drawn to Anne Frank by choice; rather, her story is one that inescapably comes with being an American Jew in the twentieth century. As perhaps the central American Holocaust narrative, Anne's diary becomes a metonym for the catastrophic event with which all Jews, and in particular Jewish writers, must grapple" (87).



*The Counterlife* (1986)

One can say that having come to the realization that the ghosts latent in other people's words, be they Frank's, the Yiddish writer's, or the Jewish tradition's Kaddish, Nathan is ready to believe in literature's power to grant immortality. In *The Counterlife*, the fifth novel of the series, Zuckerman, however, becomes disillusioned with the ability of literature to grant immortality because the book's narrative becomes a labyrinth of conflicting and competing identities and stories. The maze of alternative stories, the killing and resurrecting of characters all become a means by which he thinks he can write off death. In effect, it is too easy for literature to lie. In the end, no fiction, according to Zuckerman, can compete with the fact of life and death among the people he knows.

In *The Counterlife* as in *The Anatomy Lesson*, literature once again fails Nathan Zuckerman. Given the responsibility to write the eulogy for his brother Henry, Nathan tells Henry's widow, "everything I put down was wrong. It just didn't work" (*Counterlife* 13). When called upon to write something in memorial of his brother, Nathan cannot find the right words. He cannot face the reality of Henry's death. Just as he has done in previous novels, Nathan resorts to trying to resurrect Henry's ghost, in the very least through literary imagination. Instead of thinking of Henry as dead, Nathan recalls a memory from the distant past, their childhood: "When Nathan made the inevitable effort to imagine Henry laid out inside, he did not see, silenced, the unmanned, overheated adulterer who had refused to be resigned to losing his potency – he saw the boy of ten, lying there wearing flannel pajamas" (*Counterlife* 15). Nathan juxtaposes the memory of Henry as a child with that of him as an adult, contrasting the image of flannel pajamas with impotency, and Henry at ten years old with that of Henry as a middle-aged man laid

out in a coffin. Because he refuses to accept that Henry is dead, Nathan resurrects the ghosts of childhood memories, which subvert reality with something far more desirable. While the following chapter of *The Counterlife* shows Henry to be *alive*, and a later chapter in which it is Nathan that is dead, could be interpreted as Zuckerman's mastery of raising ghosts through fiction, the opposite is true. Nathan cannot escape death no matter the subject, and in his attempts to delay the inevitable, he only reinforces the permanency and absolute fact of death.

In the next Zuckerman novel, *American Pastoral*, Zuckerman writes a narrative that seems more like a sleight of hand, a meta-fictional magic trick subtler than *The Counterlife*. The story begins in 1995 when his own body is dying with prostate cancer. In this book, though Zuckerman tells the story of a childhood friend, and in so doing, he, Zuckerman essentially disappears. Because the book relates the story of his friend, in it, Zuckerman also has forsaken fiction altogether. Learning from Anne Frank's diary, he at last turns to real life. This time, he is the one who will resurrect the ghost of a lost life, the ghost of Seymour Levov.

## **Exit Zuckerman**

### *American Pastoral* (1997)

There is an old joke by Woody Allen that states, “It’s not that I’m afraid to die, I just don’t want to be there when it happens.” Nathan Zuckerman could have delivered this line. The narrative structure of *American Pastoral*, in which Zuckerman’s presence in the plot virtually disappears a fourth of the way into the novel, is a means by which Zuckerman can deny his own mortality. Nathan’s narrative focuses on Seymour Levov, a Jew of almost mythical stature who shirks his religious identity during World War II and its aftermath. The novel soon develops as a story of Jewish men who redefine the image of postwar Jewish identity, while simultaneously denying the absolute and universal truth of death. *American Pastoral* is a story in which Jewish men struggle with the realities of postwar life and death itself. It is a narrative in which men fail to see death with clarity and the result is that they never see each other, or themselves, with clarity either.

*American Pastoral* is comprised of multiple narratives, which occur between the early 1940s and 1995 when Nathan Zuckerman discovers that the life of his childhood idol, Levov, known during his high school glory days as “Swede,” was marred by a murderous act of domestic terrorism committed in 1968 by Levov’s daughter, Merry. Levov, the inheritor of his father’s successful leather glove factory, former all-star athlete, husband to a Miss New Jersey winner, a Marine, and homeowner in Old Rimrock, NJ – a pastoral remnant of colonial America – has his life turned upside down when Merry’s radical political beliefs are manifested in the form of blowing up a post office to protest America’s involvement in Vietnam and accidentally killing a local

doctor. Before the bomb, Levov's life seemed perfect. But Merry's radicalism causes a rude awakening for her father, essentially bringing the war in Vietnam to Old Rimrock. In doing so, she forces Levov to acknowledge the rapidly changing political nature in America. Merry rattles Levov's insular world, and the subsequent years of the Swede's life are filled with tragedy on par with the life of Job.

There is an echo of death lurking in *American Pastoral* after Seymour, in 1973, receives a letter from Rita Cohen, supposedly a radical cohort of his daughter's, concerning the whereabouts of his stuttering bundle of domestic terrorism, Merry: "[Seymour] could never root out the unexpected thing. The unexpected thing would be waiting there unseen, for the rest of his life ripening, ready to explode, just a millimeter behind everything else... And if that should happen, the unexpected thing becoming the only thing..." (AP 176). Here, the terror of death is so great that Seymour cannot finish his thought. The sentence ends with an ellipsis. It is fitting that Swede perceives death as something ready to explode, since Seymour's initial reaction to this event is denial. As he tries to explain how Merry could commit such an act, Seymour's stream of consciousness displays his attempts at repressing the fact that it was death that Merry brought home: "I always thought of Old Rimrock as a place where nothing can happen to you. But now I'm like everybody, I'm looking over my shoulder. It's going to take time before things return to normal... I'm just moving on. I have to. I have to forget about it. Like nothing ever happened" (AP 169). Seymour's earlier move to Old Rimrock, a pastoral environment in the un-Edenic Garden State of New Jersey, along with his wife, Dawn, and their daughter, was a flight from the urban, where death, crime, poverty, and suffering are visible and more prevalent due to population density. By moving out of Newark, the

Levovs were supposed to be moving away from the reality of death and decay. The idea of the pastoral as an escape from death is also found in Roth's notes for *The Counterlife*, in which he writes: "Immortality is another form of pastoral...I can't believe I'm a dinosaur because of my age. The terror is of death and dying" (Box 79, Folder 2).

Seymour's aversion to death manifests itself physically – by marrying a woman whose outer beauty, thanks to a facelift, never fades; immersion into the pastoral; and having a child. However, Nathan Zuckerman denies death through storytelling by using the tragedy of Seymour Levov<sup>12</sup> to avoid having to deal with his own mortality. Zuckerman, who graduated from Weequahic High School with Jerry Levov, Seymour's younger brother, receives a letter from Levov in the spring of 1995, asking him to write about the life of his recently deceased father, Lou Levov. But as Nathan finds out, "[i]t wasn't the father's life, it was his own he wanted revealed" (AP 21). So begins *American Pastoral's* story within a story. Shortly after receiving this letter, Zuckerman attends his forty-fifth high school reunion, where his fears about death are revealed. Elegiacally, Nathan tells us "if I were thirty or forty, the reunion would have faded sweetly away in the three hours it took me to drive home. But there was no easy mastery of such events at sixty-two, and only a year beyond cancer surgery. Instead of recapturing time past, I'd been captured by it in the present, so that passing seemingly out of the world of time I was, in fact, rocketing through its secret core" (AP 45). We find out that Nathan is recovering from cancer surgery, a very close brush with death, and that at his age he has the feel of fading from the world. This encounter is magnified when Zuckerman discovers that twenty members of his graduating class are dead, including two of the guys

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<sup>12</sup> Landais writes, "This passivity of Zuckerman narrator is marked through the three stories of the American Trilogy that Zuckerman relates, with no real part in these stories: He is simply a witness, an observer, not an actor, which reinforces his retirement from life and his engagement in art" (246).

who played for the school baseball team, the Daredevils (the team's name connotes the idea of an individual defying death). Zuckerman realizes just how close he came to dying, how easily he could have been the twenty-first name on the "In Memoriam" page, when he finds out what happened to his fellow Daredevils: "Prostate cancer. The both of them. And both in the last three years" (AP 51).

Marty "Mutt" Sheffer, the Daredevil who notifies Zuckerman of their former teammates' passing, goes on about prostate cancer, saying, "I get the blood test. I get it every six months since I heard about Utty. You get the test?" to which Zuckerman responds, "I get it." But then he notes to himself (us) "Of course, I didn't any longer because I no longer had a prostate" (AP 51). Zuckerman fails to inform anyone at the reunion of his prostate surgery. By keeping quiet about it, Zuckerman gives the appearance that he is completely healthy – that death is something for everyone else, but not him. This is an example of what Becker discusses as man's narcissism, in which the individual feels that *he* will somehow win over death, while everyone and everything else around him succumbs to it. A self-aware Zuckerman even points out that "[e]veryone's narcissism is strong at a reunion" (AP 61). The individual's attempt to assert his existence in the face of death manifests itself in a myriad of ways, most commonly through the idea of a legacy, career, or family, in which a person tries to

earn a feeling of primary value, of cosmic specialness, of ultimate usefulness to creation, of unshakable meaning. They can earn this meaning by carving out a place in nature, by building an edifice that reflects human value: a temple, a cathedral, a totem pole, a skyscraper, a family that spans three generations. The hope and belief is that the things that man creates in society are of lasting worth and meaning, that they outlive or outshine death and decay, that man and his products count. (Becker 5)

Zuckerman witnesses Becker's idea of family as an agent against death when he speaks to Mendy Gurlik. Mendy's information in the program states: "'Retired Restaurateur. Children 36, 33, 28. Grandchildren 14, 12, 9, 5, 5, 3,'" to which Nathan responds with "I wondered if the six grandchildren, including what appeared to be a set of twins, were what made Mendy so fearful of death or if there were other reasons, like reveling still in whores and sharp clothes" (AP 52). The reunion program defines the individual in terms of what job he or she had and the number of progeny produced. This is reflective of a society that determines an individual's worth, and whether he or she lived a "successful" life, by how many children were had and how much money was made; both of these being things that a person leaves behind after they die – a legacy. The idea is that the more a person leaves after they die the more that individual will be remembered, which is comforting to those who wish to not be forgotten, the logic being that a presence left on earth is a loophole to dying.

Nathan Zuckerman does not have a wife. He does not have any children. So what legacy could he possibly leave behind? The answer is Art. After years of not publishing anything, Zuckerman seizes the opportunity to write the life of Seymour Levov; to tell his story<sup>13</sup> would be to tell Nathan's own, as both grew up in the same neighborhood at roughly the same time, both experiencing the radical progression of American politics. Levov's life and downfall is a chance for Zuckerman to write another story, another piece of literature to add to his oeuvre and solidify his position as a writer. Zuckerman as a

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<sup>13</sup> Derek Parker Royal writes, "When *American Pastoral* was originally published, most critics failed to notice, or at least failed to acknowledge, that the story of the Swede was more or less a fabrication, the result of Zuckerman's nostalgically induced musings. By stating that his narrator 'dreamed a realistic chronicle,' Roth apparently threw his readers off track by purposefully blurring the boundaries between the 'dream' and the 'real.' As such, the novel becomes more or a narrative on Nathan Zuckerman and the ways in which *he* constructs reality and less of an explanatory tale of the enigmatic Swede. When we realize that the story of Swede Levov is made up or imagined by Zuckerman, then the storyteller, not the story, becomes our primary novelistic focus" (199).

writer has an entire body of work that will be read and discussed, hopefully, long after his death. His classmates at the reunion even see him as their famous writer. This “body” of work, for Zuckerman, becomes a substitute for the body that decays and dies. It is through his writing that Zuckerman tries to cheat death, as the near-permanence of art is a consolation in the face of death to the individual who is anything but permanent. When Nathan hears from Jerry Levov that his brother Seymour died, his fears result in a peculiar reaction. Nathan discovers that, shortly after meeting him at an Italian restaurant in Manhattan, the Swede died of prostate cancer. In the aftermath of this, Zuckerman ruminates:

what, in the wake of all the other isolating losses, in the wake of everything gone and everyone gone, had stripped me down into someone whose aging powers had now but a single and unswerving aim, a man who would be seeking his solace, like it or not, nowhere but in sentences, had managed the most astounding thing of all by carrying off the indestructible hero of the wartime Weequahic section, our neighborhood talisman, the legendary Swede. (AP 65)

Nathan is in shock that death took the one figure from his youth whom he always thought of as divine, and if death comes for the Swede that means that a comparative mortal like Zuckerman is surely vulnerable. Prostate cancer is the cause of death of some of Zuckerman’s high school baseball teammates; and now the Swede, too, has succumbed to the disease. The reader wonders if this is an ominous sign that Nathan’s death is close. This might be the case, that is, if Zuckerman stays in the narrative of *American Pastoral*. Instead, Nathan disappears by the end of the first book, “Paradise Remembered,” and never comes back<sup>14</sup>, allowing the focus of the narrative to rest heavily on Levov. To get us to not think about his mortality and possibly imminent death, Zuckerman decides to tell us the Swede’s story, how this seemingly perfect man accomplished a downfall on

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<sup>14</sup> In an interview with Charles McGrath in *The New York Times*, Roth, himself, acknowledges that “On page 90 I jettisoned Zuckerman – he was no longer necessary” (McGrath).



par with Job. After we learn that Seymour has just recently died, Zuckerman essentially reverses time and resurrects the past through writing. The remainder of *American Pastoral* takes place in the five-year interim between Merry's act of terrorism in 1968 and Watergate in 1973, when Swede was very much alive and (his own) death nowhere in sight.

What makes the destruction of Seymour Levov so tragic is what he had and who he was before his decline. Before everything started going wrong in his life, the Swede was viewed by virtually everyone as a legend. A star high school athlete in baseball, basketball, and football, the Swede garnered the attention that he did for one reason more than any other: in the World War II-era Jewish community of Newark, New Jersey, the Swede bore no physical resemblance to other Jews. The Swede's rise to prominence as an athlete coincides with the rise of fascism in Europe. American Jews were aware of what was happening to their family, friends, and other Jews in Europe during the 1930s and the concentration camps set up throughout Eastern Europe. The reconstruction of Jewish identity in the United States after World War II is due to the Shoah<sup>15</sup>. The visibility of Jews in Europe during this period was equivalent to suicide, as millions of Jews were taken from their homes, sent to live in crowded, decaying ghettos, and then sent by trains to labor or death camps. With all of the tragedy and suffering surrounding the image of European Jewry during the 30s and 40s it is clear why the Swede is special, a beacon of hope: he was a Jew who did not look like a Jew but could be promoted by Jews as one of their own, safely placing him, and therefore the rest of the community, in the public eye. It is because of this association with suffering, victimization, and

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<sup>15</sup> Hebrew for "Catastrophe," Shoah is the preferred term for the annihilation of European Jewry during the Nazi regime.

extermination, that a new image of Jews is established, something that I will refer to from here on as a “death-identity.”

Mark Shechner notes “Roth’s Jews are not a *people*, a *culture*, *nation*, *tradition*, or any other noun of rabbinical piety. They are a *tribe*, which, after its own primitive fashion, observes arbitrary taboos and performs strange sundown rituals that look like obsessional symptoms” (Shechner 122-123). It is this identity, this association with being an Other, that Seymour feels is irrelevant. As Zuckerman recounts, “[o]f the few fair-complexioned Jewish students in our preponderantly Jewish high school, none possessed anything remotely like the steep-jawed, insentient Viking mask of this blue-eyed born into our tribe as Seymour Irving Levov” (*AP* 3). Despite Nathan Zuckerman’s assertion as an American writer who happens to be a Jew, instead of a Jewish American writer, one cannot help but notice the collective identity in this passage (the idea that Nathan is saying Swede was born into *our* tribe), as well as throughout the novel. Timothy Parrish discusses an aspect of the relationship between Zuckerman and the Swede, as well as its effect on the narrative, stating,

In *American Pastoral* it is as if Zuckerman is transformed into an earlier version of himself – the one that existed before he discovered the burden – and joy – of subjectivity. No longer his own subject, Zuckerman thus ostensibly removes himself from being the protagonist and displaces the role on to the character of Swede Levov...suggests that this character was born to make the transformation that Zuckerman has struggled so ardently for in his life and art: to become an American who happens to be a Jew. (Parrish 86)

On behalf of the tribe, the Swede glorifies and celebrates Jewish achievement without calling attention to the fact of his being Jewish, making it safe for other Jews after the Shoah. Though the Shoah is not explicitly evoked in *American Pastoral*, it is subliminally implied when the war is brought up. For example, Zuckerman says that

“through the Swede, the 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 about the war” (AP 4). Whereas the rest of America saw its victories in Europe and the Pacific as the dawn of the United States as a global superpower, for Jews, no matter how important it is for the collective whole to remember, any individual would want to forget the suffering between 1933 and 1945.

On the Shoah in relation to Jewish American writers, Emily Miller Budick writes,

Americans, including American Jews, occupy an oblique and distant relation to the events of the catastrophe. Furthermore, America, where they reside, is for many Jews not only the cause or continuation of historical antisemitism, but, quite the contrary, its solution... Indeed the story of the American Jew, in order to get itself going, may well have to rid itself of the past that binds it to Jewish realities no longer pertinent or desirable. (Budick 217)

Herein lies a conundrum for the Jewish community as well as for Jews as individuals: to accept the past means either to accept this death-identity, to face one's mortality and the reality of death, or to shirk one's Jewishness and establish a new identity, one that is not so closely associated with death – allowing an individual to remain in denial. However, Budick posits a question for Jewish American writers<sup>16</sup> who have chosen/choose either of these identities: “how can Jewish writers construct identity without recourse to the Holocaust? Jewish American fiction would seem to be caught in a no-win bind. Forget the past and the Jewish component falls away. Remember the past and you write

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<sup>16</sup> Gooblar writes, “For American writers such as [Cynthia] Ozick, Roth and Zuckerman, the choice to deal with the Holocaust in their fiction is no choice at all – it is always there, informing their very identities and literary sensibilities” (87).

European rather than American fiction” (Budick 218). Arguably, Philip Roth writes fiction that sits in the liminal space between the two. Daniel Walden states,

Roth discovered that the Jew is an archetype of the disjointed, dissociated modern man in America. The sense of rootlessness, of alienation and fragmentation, the search for personal identity and purpose, all constitute the dilemma of modern man and are a major source of the dysfunction of the modern American Jew. Add to that the more specific Jewish problems of homelessness and rejection, the conflict between tradition and assimilation, and the Jewish penchant for suffering, and you account for the search for a meaningful identity. (Walden 78-79)

A new Jewish American identity is constructed by refusing to accept death and this death-identity, the Swede being a prime example of postwar American Jewishness.

Nathan describes Levov as someone who “had what it took to avoid anything disjointed, anything special, anything improper, anything difficult to assess or understand,” someone “blessed with all the attributes of a monumental ordinariness” (*AP* 81). Levov avoids things that are confusing, messy, whereas Walden earlier remarked that Jews for Roth are archetypes for traits such as disjointedness. Swede rejects the idea of double-consciousness in favor of being an American and nothing more, forgoing the issue of how to coincide Jewishness and being an American.

Zuckerman tells us that the Swede is someone who “lived in America the way that he lived inside his own skin. All the pleasures of his younger years were American pleasures, all that success and happiness had been American...everything that gave meaning to his accomplishments had been American. Everything he loved was here” (*AP* 213). Perhaps the Swede’s greatest accomplishment is the nearly complete removal from anything Jewish – he marries a shiksa Miss America finalist, raises a daughter in a non-religious home, and moves to a rural, historically rich New Jersey community where

there is virtually no Jewish presence. Jeffery Rubin-Dorsky describes the implications of the Swede assimilating into the hegemony of postwar American culture, in which

Levov represents the culminating moment of Jewish assimilation in America, the elimination of uncertainty and anxiety, the erasure of contradiction and obsession, the eradication of self-consciousness and self-doubt, the end, finally, of wandering and waywardness. And the cost of such achievement? Only this: the suppression of just about everything that has defined and shaped Jewish identity in America. (Rubin-Dorsky 97)

One could even say that there is a direct correlation between Swede's demise and the rebuking of Jewish tradition, as if it were a divine punishment, though in actuality it is due to Swede's refusal to accept his mortality. It becomes clear that by the end of the novel Seymour has failed to achieve a state of mind in which he is free of anxiety and uncertainty – the terror of death is always present.

Due to the events of World War II and the devastation of the Shoah, the identities of Swede's generation of American Jews have been forever changed. To rid themselves of this death-identity, Newark's Jews made the Swede into their savior, creating this image of him as if he were divine. Zuckerman implicitly addresses the Jewish community's fascination with Swede's non-Jewishness as a means of shirking the death-identity when he says that Levov was "a boy as close to a goy as we were ever going to get" (AP 10). Aimee Pozorski writes that "[f]or Zuckerman, Levov was such a talented and amiable athlete that he had the power to erase the history of anti-Semitism in the twentieth century" (Pozorski 42). For Newark's postwar Jewish community, Seymour Levov was something *more* than human.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> In "Reading the Body in Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*," Alex Hobbs writes, "Despite the importance placed upon his physical skills and his body as the site of his success, his facial features define the contours of his identity. His renaming by the community is triggered not by his skills, but his facial features. Even as he is claimed a hero for the local community, he is newly labeled and categorized to indicate his aesthetic

The Swede's quasi-divinity is born not only from his athletic ability throughout high school, but also for his willingness to join the Marine Corps towards the end of World War II. Of course, by the time that the Swede makes his way through boot camp the war is over. Swede joins the Marines because he wanted "to fire the tank killer, the hand-held bazooka rocket, wanted to prove to myself I wasn't scared and could do that stuff... Wanted to help win the war" (AP 211). The fear is that of death, and Swede feels that by enlisting in the Corps and being sent to the European or Pacific campaigns, he can conquer death by not being afraid of it – a war against death. The irony is that the war ends before Swede has the chance to leave Parris Island, South Carolina, thus robbing him of the chance to test his bravery.

Swede's heroism, on and off the athletic field, reflects his and the community's denial of death. Ernest Becker describes our construction of heroism as an extension of our narcissism.

One of the key concepts for understanding man's urge to heroism is the idea of 'narcissism'...we are hopelessly absorbed with ourselves. If we care about anyone it is usually ourselves first of all...practically everyone is expendable except ourselves...This narcissism is what keeps men marching into point-blank fire in wars: at heart one doesn't feel that *he* will die, he only feels sorry for the man next to him. Freud's explanation for this was that the unconscious does not know death or time: in man's physiochemical, inner organic recesses he feels immortal... (Becker 2)

Swede's narcissism goes to the extreme of thinking that his importance is great enough to end a war that had been raging for close to six years, engulfing practically every nation on earth. *That* is the meaning of cosmic significance, of narcissism. And Zuckerman's idolatry of the Swede only furthers the notion of him as an indestructible, infallible quasi-divine being. Throughout Nathan's development from adolescence to adulthood, the

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difference from them; he is set apart from his peers, from his family, and from his past, foreshadowing his future decision to remove himself geographically from the community" (73).

image of the Swede is a permanent talisman against death. This explains why Swede's downfall is that much greater to him. After running into the Swede at a Mets game, a friend of Zuckerman's tells him "You should have seen your face – you might as well have told us he was Zeus. I saw just what you looked like as a boy" (AP 17). Levov's presence is so great, so godlike, that even middle-aged Nathan Zuckerman cannot help but feel joyous after seeing him. Catherine Morley discusses Levov and heroism, as well as the role of the hero in Roth's American Trilogy, arguing that the trilogy is a modern day epic, noting, "the hero as moving within a world too vast and multi-dimensional for him to comprehend and, almost always unwillingly, the hero is obliged to confront the mystery of life and death, the relationship between past, present and future, and the conflict between good and evil" (Morley 180-181). We see these relationships, these antagonistic forces, throughout *American Pastoral* and the toll that they take on Seymour. Difficulties to understand the events occurring in his life send the Swede into a state of confusion that verges near madness. The Swede is constructed as a hero whom Zuckerman and the rest of Newark's Jews can rely on, thus placing an immense burden on someone who, in the end, is just a man. And when a burden such as the hopes and fears of an entire community is placed on one man, it seems impossible to think that he would *not* break.

After hearing of the Swede's death, Zuckerman disappears from the narrative, no longer serving as an active participant in the story of Levov's life. Parrish suggests that Zuckerman leaves the narrative because Swede does what Nathan spent his entire life and career trying to accomplish, which is being an American first, Jew second. However, I would add that Nathan seizes the opportunity to try to make us forget about his mortality

through the death of his childhood hero in the hopes that Swede's downfall will be great enough to distract us while Zuckerman quietly denies the inevitable. *American Pastoral* ends without a trace of Zuckerman, his last appearance hundreds of pages earlier, as if we might forget him. Death is the "impossible that is going to happen" (AP 86), and for Zuckerman, we will not be there when it does. Due to our inability to deal with the absolute truth of death, the certainty of our imminent non-existence, we rely on creating heroes such as Seymour Levov so that, like Zuckerman, we can avoid our definitive end. Perhaps the greatest tragedy is not what befalls the life of the Levovs, as the novel's final line suggests, but that we have the ability to create heroes out of men without the ability to prevent this burden from crushing them. Like gods in our own right, we watch as the image we have created of a better and more perfect version of ourselves decays before our very eyes. For Roth, nothing is less reprehensible than expecting anything else.



## **Epilogue: “Not a funeral so much as a denial of funeral”**

Roth’s notes for *The Counterlife*, include a line jotted down by the typewriter, the vehicle for Roth’s freewheeling mind, which states, “Not a funeral so much as a denial of a funeral” (Box 79, Folder 2). In a way, this summates the Zuckerman series as a whole. All nine novels in which Zuckerman is the narrator/protagonist serve as the denial of a funeral. While *Exit Ghost* (2007) is the last novel to feature Nathan Zuckerman, and Roth would go on to publish only two subsequent novels, retiring after the publication of *Nemesis* in 2010, Zuckerman is saved from an absolute death – absolute in the sense of being completely erased in all existing forms, including print – thanks to his body of work. In concluding her “eulogy” for Nathan, Miriam Jaffe-Foger writes,

Oh, dear Zuckerman, no one can control everything, not even an omniscient narrator. Just let us remember you, as we have here. You readers, your family, your friends, your enemies, your critics, your fans will all have their own perspectives. You are lucky in death to have been understood by many in many different ways, to have shared your art for us to interpret however we may. We have just begun to tell *your* story, Zuckerman. You will live on as the sum of many parts. (Jaffe-Foger 282)

I argue that the survival of his literary “body” is no true compensation for the decay of his actual one. His efforts are acts of mock heroism in the face of death, committed under the belief that literature is an artistic loophole to evade the fate that claims us all. Conflict is at the center of Roth’s work. Death is one of the essential antagonistic forces that Roth pits his characters against. In *American Pastoral*, Zuckerman writes, “Let’s speak further of death and of the desire – understandably in the ageing a desperate desire – to forestall death, to resist it, to resort to whatever means are necessary to see death with anything, anything, *anything* but clarity” (AP 47). To see death with clarity would be to accept the

inevitable, to admit that everything and everyone, no matter how great, must end. The irony is that the longer death is avoided so that its reality is suppressed to the margins of our consciousness, the more devastating its effect. Zuckerman's many attempts at resurrecting ghosts through his fiction reflect the inability to accept that death, and not literature, is permanent. For Zuckerman the writer, nothing could be more tragic than devoting all of his life to literature so that he may carve out a niche for himself in the American literary canon, only to realize in the end that nothing prevents us from escaping the grave. The greater tragedy is not going to the funeral, but pretending that one will never happen.

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