CHAPTER 17

Postmodernism

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In *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), Nathan Zuckerman, Roth's regular alter-ego, receives a letter from the editors of the student newspaper at his alma mater, the University of Chicago. They want to interview the famous novelist – author of the notorious smash-hit *Carnovsky*, a novel that bears a striking resemblance to Roth's own notorious smash-hit, *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) – about "the future of his kind of fiction in the postmodernist era of John Barth and Thomas Pynchon."[1] Among their proposed interview questions, the editors ask whether "you feel yourself part of a rearguard action in the service of a declining tradition?," to which Zuckerman answers to himself, *sotto voce*, "Yes."

This scene seemingly sets up a familiar distinction between two different strands of post-1945 American fiction: in one corner, the "rearguard" realists, tending the flame of a "declining" tradition; in the other, the experimental postmodernists, writing avant-garde fictions of riddling formal ingenuity. Through Zuckerman, Roth seems to position "his kind of fiction" firmly in the first camp, and indeed he has usually been read alongside writers whose work is also discussed in these terms: early on in his career, Roth was grouped with other Jewish-American authors like Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and Grace Paley, none of them names we would associate with postmodernism; later, he was likened to realist heavyweight John Updike, whose *Rabbit* novels were an inspiration for the Zuckerman series; and later still, his "American Trilogy" was compared to the work of modernist old masters like Conrad and Faulkner.

In this map of the post-1945 literary field, Roth and the realists occupy a different space to that of postmodern fabulists like Don DeLillo, Barth, Donald Barthelme, William Gaddis, and Pynchon. Of this notably all-male group – there was a certain machismo about what is now known as "high" postmodernism – Barth and Pynchon are particularly good examples for the Chicago students to choose, because the two authors are representative of two dominant aesthetic preoccupations within the

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postmodern camp. Barth is the consummate academic metafictionalist conjuring reflexive funhouse fictions, and the author of "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967), often described as the manifesto of American literary postmodernism. Barth's essay diagnoses a feeling of cultural belatedness washing over writers of his generation after the waning of modernism, and celebrates Jorge Luis Borges's intricate metafictional tales as an example of "the literature of exhausted possibility" for novelists to follow.[2] Pynchon, meanwhile, represents the "maximalist" impulse within postmodernism. His 1973 novel, *Gravity's Rainbow*, stands as one of the key examples of what Tom LeClair calls the "systems novel," preoccupied with technology, popular culture, and ontologically-freighted conspiracy theories, which became a recognizable form in this period: from Pynchon's encyclopaedic novel, to Gaddis's *JR* (1976), through to David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996).[3]

But of course even as the scene in *The Anatomy Lesson* appears to set up this clear distinction between realism and postmodernism, it also challenges it; this moment of ironising self-awareness is nothing if not flashily metafictional. Moreover, it is one of many such sleight of hand passages in Roth's work wherein he blurs the line between fact and fiction by drawing attention to the artifice of his narrative, and by exploiting the tendency of readers to identify him with his characters. As such, the scene is representative of the way in which Roth's fiction – and especially the fiction from the "middle period" of his career, the mid-1970s to the early 1990s – eschews easy categorization and generic classification; works such as *My Life as a Man* (1974), *The Counterlife* (1986), and *Operation Shylock* (1993), among others, signal Roth's deep interest in metafictional reflexivity and formal experimentation during these decades.

It is not surprising to find Roth engaging with these ideas at this point in his career, because what I'm calling Roth's middle period correlates with what Brian McHale describes as the era of "peak postmodernism" in America, dating from approximately 1973 to 1990.[4] This period saw the intensification of what Fredric Jameson called the "cultural logic of late capitalism" underpinning postmodernism. For Jameson, the condition of postmodernity is defined by a "weakening of historicity" and a "waning of the utopian" – that is, as an age that has forgotten how to think critically about the past, and that is unable to imagine the future.[5] This fractured temporality results in a "depthlessness" and "schizophrenic" fragmentation in postmodern culture, Jameson suggests, manifest in a preoccupation with spectacle and image, with commercial and popular cultural forms and aesthetic categories (such as kitsch, camp, and pastiche), and with

technologies of electronic reproduction. As well as a temporal disjuncture, postmodernity is also defined by a mutation of spatiality that requires a new sense of cultural and political orientation – what Jameson calls "cognitive mapping." Another of postmodernism's most influential theorists, Jean-Francois Lyotard, similarly argues that in this unfamiliarly splintered intellectual landscape, the old grand narratives of modernity seem inadequate; instead of striving for universalism, postmodernity is formed through the *petits récits*, or minor narratives, of particularity, pluralism, identity, and localism.[6]

In the US context, this postmodern distrust of master narratives was vindicated by, and found expression in, the intense political turmoil of the period: the assassinations of President Kennedy (1963), Malcolm X (1965), Martin Luther King (1968), and Robert Kennedy (1968); the escalation of the conflict in Vietnam; the mass civil disobedience of the anti-war and Civil Rights movements; the ham-fisted crookedness revealed in the Watergate scandal; and the widespread anxiety over nuclear annihilation in an age of Cold War paranoia. All seemed to confirm the "schizophrenia" of postmodernity. If American political life seemed permeated by a sense of "unreality," then so too did much postmodern theory. This period saw the American academy embrace the work of continental thinkers such as Lacan, Foucault, and Derrida, who sought to challenge and "deconstruct" the first principles underwriting the formulation of knowledge across a range of academic disciplines. Informed by poststructuralism, the work of these thinkers – especially Derrida – was characterized by a "performative play with language" which delighted in puns, homonyms, and neologisms as a form of critique allowing for "the contamination of oppositions and distinctions" and "the blurring of various genres."[7] Thus, as Linda Hutcheon suggests, we can understand postmodernism as a disruptive cultural logic defined by a preoccupation with "discontinuity, disruption, dislocation, decentering, indeterminacy and antitotalization."[8]

Formal discontinuity and the blurring of generic boundaries became hallmarks of the most overtly postmodernist fiction in this period, which often displayed a conceptual interest in mixing "high" and "low" cultural references, in borrowing from genre fiction, and in experimenting with pastiche and parody. Thus in *Gravity's Rainbow,* "widely canonised as the central document in American literary postmodernism," we discover a world in which the erections of protagonist Lieutenant Tyrone Slothrop seem, as he wanders around World War II London, to map the sites of V-2 rocket strikes – a plot that prefigures Jameson's concept of cognitive

mapping and his diagnosis of the "waning historicity" of postmodern culture, while also speaking to a broader contemporary concern with conspiracy and technology.[9] Pynchon's Melvillian epic is a kind of quest narrative gone wrong wherein the narrative's various threads unspool and confusingly tangle, reflective of the "schizophrenic" paranoia of postmodernism, and of a broader distrust of ontological coherence. These became formal preoccupations not only in the rather bloated fabulist allegories of Barth et al., but also in the sparer fiction of a writer like Paul Auster, author of *The New York Trilogy* (1987), which takes the form of an extended riff on the detective novel, a genre that became "the paradigmatic archetype of the postmodern literary imagination."[10]

Roth's fiction from these decades has a number of affinities with the work of his contemporaries, and has been shaped by a similar set of social contexts. Representing the culmination of his middle period, *Operation Shylock* shares an interest in schizophrenic fragmentation, indeterminacy, and a postmodern decentering of the self. The novel is the story of an author called Philip Roth whose identity is appropriated by a nefarious doppelgänger, Moishe Pipik, intent on using the writer's fame to promulgate a counter-Zionist movement – a "new Diasporism" – that will destroy the State of Israel. Subtitled "A Confession," the novel not only shares with much postmodern fiction an interest in surveillance, outlandish conspiracy, and detection, but also in exploring "the boundaries of fiction and reality," as Elaine Safer puts it in an analysis that compares Roth and Barth.[11] Like Roth's previous novel set in Israel, *The Counterlife* – in which a narrator dies only to be brought back to life, and a character discovers a manuscript for what turns out to be the novel's final chapter – *Operation Shylock* has many postmodern hallmarks, leading John Updike, Roth's one-time stablemate in the realist camp, to conclude that the book was just the latest example of a wearisomely "deconstruction-minded" novel.[12] The narrative certainly shares with Pynchon's work an interest in cartoonish historical fabulism, mixing a journalistic account of the trial of John Demjanjuk, allegedly a former concentration camp guard, with Pipik's own zany counter-history of the Jewish people. Pipik is even revealed to have a mechanical penis, an allusion to Alexander Portnoy's onomastic exploits to be sure, but also perhaps to Pynchon's Slothrop. Pynchon's penchant for puns and lampooning American mythology is also evoked in Roth's *The Great American Novel* (1973). Published in the same year as *Gravity's Rainbow*, Roth's encyclopaedic baseball-themed romp is a curious parallel example of the maximalist impulse in postmodernism, even if its comic sensibility owes more in the end to Mark Twain than Pynchon and company.[13]

With a wider historical lens, we can also see Roth responding to the political traumas that, as I previously suggested, underwrote American postmodernism. As far back as 1960, Roth had bemoaned the difficulty the contemporary novelist faced in making "*credible* much of American reality," because life in the United States seemed to so relentlessly outpace the fiction writer's "meager imagination."[14] This argument found ample support in the ensuing turmoil of the next decade or so, which often features obliquely in Roth's work. In *The Anatomy Lesson*, we find Zuckerman prostrate on the floor nursing a neck injury and watching the Watergate trial on television through "a pair of prism glasses" designed "for the bedridden" that enable him to "see at right angles."[15] It is an image that not only reflects a postmodern interest in spectacle, but that also more broadly captures something of the "through the looking glass" quality of the years of Nixon's presidency (1969–1974), a topic Roth had already explored in the political satire *Our Gang* (1971). Elsewhere, a paranoid fear of assassination forms the backdrop to *Zuckerman Unbound*, published in 1981 but set in 1969, in which Zuckerman is stalked by the mysterious Alvin Pepler – a precursor to Moishe Pipik– whom he worries "might be an Oswald."[16] In *My Life as a Man* – a densely layered metafiction that, like *The Counterlife*, experiments with a series of collapsing narrative frames – we find Zuckerman ensconced in an Italian retreat befitting a Thomas Mann or Henry James character, reading the news from "post-Oswald America" in a detached state of bewilderment.[17] A page later, Zuckerman resignedly acknowledges that he must "leave it to those writers who live in the flamboyant American present, and whose extravagant fictions I sample from afar, to treat the implausible, the preposterous, and the bizarre" nature of American reality in "something other" than his own "straightforward and recognizable manner."[18] As in the vignette from *The Anatomy Lesson* with which I opened this essay, Roth here "manages to nail Zuckerman's colours to a realist mast," while "at the same time" displaying an archly postmodern "reflexive self-awareness."[19]

These points of contact between Roth's work and that of his contemporaries, and with a wider cultural and political milieu, suggest that we should understand the period of "peak postmodernism" not as "purely postmodern but as characterized by the coexistence and frequent commingling" of metafictional "experimentalism" and "traditional realism."[20] In a similar vein, David Brauner concludes that much of Roth's fiction from these decades "appropriates, complicates and finally parodies aspects of both realism and postmodernism," echoing Debra Shostak's summary that Roth's novels maintain a "delicate balance" between the two.[21] And yet

I would still suggest that we take Zuckerman (and Roth) seriously when he indicates that "his kind of fiction" ultimately belongs to a different "tradition" from that of Barth and Pynchon; that there is, finally, a different emphasis to Roth's interest in the boundary between fact and fiction, in artifice and indeterminacy, and thus a different rationale behind his subsequent experiments in form and genre.

To get at this difference, it is useful to introduce two terms that add nuance to the categories of "realism" and "postmodernism" I have been using so far: "technomodernism" and "high cultural pluralism." These terms come from *The Program Era* (2008), Mark McGurl's influential account of the dynamic relationship between universities and post-1945 literary production. McGurl's analysis of "the culture of the school" elaborates the forms of "institutionality" at work in the literary field in the second half of the twentieth century, a period when many writers studied or taught at newly-established creative writing programs or were employed within university English departments.[22] Barth – who taught in universities for forty years – is one of McGurl's prime examples of a writer whose work emerges from this web of institutionality, not least in *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966), a "disciplinary allegory" in which a university represents the universe.[23] More broadly, Barth is also a case study in "technomodernism." This adjustment of the term "postmodernism" is meant to emphasize, first, the crucial interest in information technology that distinguishes the systems novels of DeLillo, Gaddis, and Pynchon (and which definitely isn't among Roth's major themes), and second, the high esteem afforded to the idea of *techne*, or craft, within the academic contexts in which much of this kind of fiction was written and read.

In contrast to technomodernism, McGurl outlines another strand of post–World War II fiction: high cultural pluralism, composed mainly of ethnic minority and women writers. Chiming with the liberal cultural pluralism of the postwar era, fiction in this camp championed the work of writers from demographics usually occluded from the canon; thus began the tendency to imagine the literary field as sub-divided into Jewish-American, African-American, and Asian-American fiction, and so on.[24] Not all "minority" writers automatically fit this model; we might think of Paul Auster, who is from a similar background to Roth (brought up in a lower middle-class Jewish family in New Jersey), but who would likely be grouped with the technomodernists. Rather, McGurl suggests, what distinguishes high cultural pluralist fiction is the way it combines "the particularity of the ethnic [. . .] voice with the elevated idiom of literary modernism."[25]

This emphasis on voice seems particularly apt in the case of Roth, because many of his books just "won't shut up," to borrow his own description of *The Anatomy Lesson*; or, to put it another way, Roth is more interested in talk than *techne*.[26] His experiments with voice owe less to Pynchon and Barth than to Saul Bellow, whose fiction opened up the possibilities of a style that, as Roth himself puts it, combined "a literary complexity with a conversational ease," a combination that became a model for Roth's loquacious fiction.[27] "The book of my life is a book of voices," an older Zuckerman reflects in a later novel, and the same might be said of many of Roth's books.[28] There are the voices of motormouths like Pipik, Pepler, and *The Counterlife*'s Jimmy Ben-Joseph, another haranguing doppelgänger; or the voice of Alexander Portnoy, which owes much to psychoanalytic free association, but also borrows from the stand-up shtick of Lenny Bruce; or the voices of Philip and Claire in *Deception* (1990), a novel comprised almost entirely of pillow talk; or the voice of Maria – who "speaks in the most mesmeric tones" and is a "great talker" – in *The Counterlife*, a novel in which there is no "single authoritative voice" and so no "master narrative," but "a series of coexisting fictional possibilities."[29] Voice, then, comes to distinguish Roth's high cultural pluralist interest in themes of indeterminacy, performativity, and subjectivity from that of his technomodernist contemporaries, and to define some of his most developed formal experimentations in this period.

Despite this emphasis on voice, however, McGurl is careful to note that high cultural pluralism also emerges, like technomodernism, from an institutional network. A case in point is Roth's own teaching career, which included stints as an instructor at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and as a visiting professor at the University of Pennsylvania. But, in closing, I want to focus on an earlier encounter with academia that perhaps had more bearing on Roth's work and his relationship with postmodernism. Roth was a graduate student at the University of Chicago in the mid-1950s, and returned to teach composition from 1956 to 1958.[30] As Ted Solotaroff, a classmate, recalls, the 1950s were a time when "seriousness" and "responsibility" were the "solemn passwords of a generation that [. . .] pondered E.M. Forster's 'only connect,'" "subscribed to Lionel Trilling's moral realism," and worshipped Henry James.[31] Chicago at this time was also famous as the home of a "neo-Aristotelian" approach to literary study that stressed the work of art's inner unity and strenuously valued mimetic structural coherence. In his memoir of his failed attempt to become a "good Aristotelian" at Chicago, Solotaroff remembers first meeting Roth in a class on James in which they sparred over *Daisy Miller*, and, by his own

account, Roth was a "very intense fellow" who was "instinctively fanatical about seriousness" as a student.[32] "In 1956," Roth writes in his autobiography, "I saw the University of Chicago as the best place in America to enjoy maximum personal freedom [and] to find intellectual liveliness."[33]

Like Roth, Zuckerman also went to Chicago as an earnest literary student, returning to teach composition with a syllabus "drawn mostly from the work of Olympians," including Aristotle.[34] As an undergraduate, Zuckerman learns to value Trillingite critical watchwords such as "vision" and "authenticity," and, of course, "human," for which he develops "a particular addiction"; as an instructor at Chicago, meanwhile, he is filled with a sense of religious vocation: "the classroom caused me to imagine myself to be something of a priest."[35] The great tragic farce of the early Zuckerman books, then, becomes that of a writer who is schooled in such 1950s moral seriousness and who "believed everything Aristotle taught me about literature," but whose own work (betraying a distinctly un-Jamesian interest in what Roth elsewhere calls the "raw and vernacular") receives a very different reception in postmodern 1960s America.[36] Pursued by Alvin Pepler – one of his many readers who confuse fact and fiction – Zuckerman bemoans the fact that, rather than "doing what Aristotle promised from art in Humanities 2" and offering a mimetic form allowing for "moral perception," his own books seem to breed a "living fiction" that is "unaccountable and uncontainable". "Oh," Zuckerman exclaims, "if only Alvin had studied Aristotle with [me] at Chicago!"[37]

At his most daring, however, Roth does not settle for the desperate ironising comedy of Zuckerman's predicament. Rather, he tries to imagine a kind of productive antagonism between the "flamboyant American present" and the seemingly outmoded ideas of form and genre and "old-fashioned liberal humanism" he and his alter-ego have been taught at Chicago.[38] As Debra Shostak argues, instead of pursuing language games or formal ingenuities for their own sake, Roth retains his "commitment to mimetic narratives," and thus to a Chicagoan, Aristotelian concept of literature, even as he experiments with metafictional reflexivity.[39] Roth himself gives a version of this argument when explaining that there is nothing "'postmodernist,' or the least bit avant-garde" about *The Counterlife*'s "cannibalizing" narrative structure, because "there is nothing unusual about somebody's changing his story [. . .] we are writing fictitious versions of our lives all the time, contradictory but mutually entangling stories that [. . .] constitute our hold on reality."[40] This prefigures what will become a key theme in Roth's later work, a theme neatly captured in a much-quoted line from *American Pastoral* (1997): "That's how we know

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we're alive: we're wrong."[41] In fact, this theme of "unknowability" becomes something of a through-line connecting Roth's overt middle period metafictions with his celebrated "return" to realism in the American Trilogy and beyond. Roth's achievement in the decades of peak postmodernism is to dramatize this losing struggle for knowledge at a formal level, and to do so in an uncensored vernacular that is by turns uniquely outrageous and lyrical, making his a compelling voice, even in our "post-postmodern" age.

Notes

1 Philip Roth, *The Anatomy Lesson* [1983] (New York: Vintage, 1996), 281.
2 John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," in *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction* (New York: Putnam, 1984), 64.
3 See Tom LeClair, *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1987).
4 See Brian McHale, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 62–108.
5 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 6; "The Politics of Utopia," New Left *Review* 24 (Jan/Feb 2004), 36.
6 Jean-Francois, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* [French, 1979], trans. Geoffrey Bennninign and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 20; McHale, *Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism*, 68.
7 Nicole Anderson, "Derrida's Language," in Benoît Dillet, Iain MacKenzie, and Robert Porter, eds., *The Edinburgh Companion to Poststructuralism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 252.
8 Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 3.
9 Adam Kelly, *American Fiction in Transition: Observer-Hero Narrative, the 1990s, and Postmodernism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 2.
10 William Spanos, "The Detective and the Boundary: Some Notes on the Postmodern Literary Imagination," *Boundary* 2.1/1 (Autumn 1972), 154.
11 Elaine Safer, *Mocking the Age: The Later Novels of Philip Roth* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 41.
12 John Updike, "Recruiting Raw Nerves," *New Yorker*, March 15, 1993, 109.
13 See Debra Shostak, *Philip Roth: Countertexts, Counterlives* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 197.
14 Roth, "Writing American Fiction," in *Why Write? Collected Nonfiction 1960–2013* (New York: Library of America, 2017), 27.
15 Roth, *The Anatomy Lesson*, 9.

16 Roth, *Zuckerman Unbound* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), 158.
17 Roth, *My Life as a Man* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974), 85.
18 *My Life as a Man*, 87.
19 David Brauner, *Philip Roth* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 62.
20 Andrew Hoberek, "Introduction: After Postmodernism," *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 53.3 (Fall 2007), 236.
21 Brauner, *Philip Roth*, 8; Shostak, *Philip Roth*, 190.
22 Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 30.
23 Ibid., 40.
24 On the entry of Jewish-American writers into the literary mainstream, see Jonathan Freedman, *The Temple of Culture: Assimilation and Anti-Semitism in Literary Anglo-America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
25 McGurl, *The Program Era*, 57.
26 Roth, "Interview with *The Paris Review*" [1984], in *Why Write?*, 142–167: 161.
27 Roth, "Writing American Fiction," 34. See also "Rereading Saul Bellow" [2000], in *Why Write?*, 292–308.
28 Roth, *I Married a Communist* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1998), 222.
29 Roth, *The Counterlife* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1986), 258; Brauner, Philip Roth, 69.
30 For a detailed account of the connection between Roth's fiction and education, see Kasia Boddy, "Philip Roth's Great Books: A Reading of *The Human Stain*," *Cambridge Quarterly* 39.1 (2010), 39–60.
31 Ted Solotaroff, *The Red Hot Vacuum: and Other Pieces on the Writing of the Sixties* (New York: Athaneum, 1970), 314.
32 Solotaroff, *First Loves: A Memoir* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), 199, 193; Roth, "Just a Lively Boy," in Molly McQuade, ed., *An Unsentimental Education: Writers and Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 126, 127.
33 Roth, *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1988), 88.
34 *My Life as a Man*, 47.
35 Ibid., 17, 58.
36 *Zuckerman Unbound*, 95; "Just a Lively Boy," 127.
37 *Zuckerman Unbound*, 198.
38 Brauner, *Philip Roth*, 61.
39 Shostak, *Philip Roth*, 18.
40 Roth, "Interview on Zuckerman" [1988], in *Why Write?*, 168–179 (178).
41 Roth, *American Pastoral* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1997), 35.