Excerpt

"The American adventure was one’s engulfing fate,” Philip Roth once said, referring to the moment in post–World War II American history when his family truly felt their “American claim.”1 This line might just as accurately apply to Roth’s writing life as it does his family life, as in his fiction he traverses the complexity, tragedy, humor, joy, and absurdity of the American adventure over the course of his six-decade career. The sheer range of phenomena Roth addresses—from identity politics to gender politics to political correctness, from maturity to mortality, from art to propaganda, from pleasure to pain—makes Charles McGrath’s elegiac description of Roth as “prolific, protean, and blackly comic” particularly apt.2

McGrath’s brief epithet also captures a sense of why Roth can be one of the most renowned and critically lauded twentieth-century American authors, while remaining, in certain ways, one of the most elusive. His elaborate fictive processes of doubling, via the several alter egos in his work, combined with his wry evasiveness (or outright denials) about connections between his life and his writing, deepens the irony and complexity of his work. “The trust of the reader is distrusted by Roth,” writes Joseph O’Neill. “Hence the games he plays with authorial identity and with crossing our lines of decency. It’s as if the only ethically tolerable situation, for Roth the artist, is that of being under permanent accusation—his most diligent accuser being himself.”3 Challenging in the best sense, Roth’s “games” are not frivolous, but reveal nuanced examinations of himself, of imagined others, of historical and contemporary injustice, of national identity, and much more; his appraisal of American life is simultaneously hilarious, heartbreaking, scathing, and empathetic.

Roth’s unique prose, humor, and narrative control can be appreciated on their own in many respects. Yet reading Roth’s work in its various social, historical, and theoretical contexts enriches this appreciation, and deepens our understanding of his literary endeavors. These contexts
illuminate hidden corners of his body of work, which is rife with a multitude of allusions and influences, and help to unravel the intertwining convolutions that lie at the heart of his fiction. This collection aims to provide such insights, adding depth and dimension to interpretations of Roth’s writing by advancing an understanding of the elements that helped shape his texts. As such, it is my hope that this volume will also provide inspiration for new readings of Roth, supplementing and augmenting the collection of impressive scholarship that currently exists.

The volume is divided into eight sections, each one focusing on a particular context that sheds light on Roth’s work and provides direction for further study. Of course, there is overlap among these categories: critical contexts are also literary contexts; geographical contexts are also biographical contexts; sections on gender and sexuality and on Jewish-American identity intersect with the political and theoretical contexts, and so forth. The goal of the individual sections in the volume is to consider Roth’s work through a particular lens as closely as possible, with the contextual intersections offering through-lines that lend the collection a greater element of cohesiveness.

The first section covers foundational biographical material, with Matthew Shipe’s opening chapter on Roth’s life offering a useful primer and rationale for the more specific contextual studies that follow. Subsequent chapters by Rachael McLennan and Dan O’Brien address a convergence of biographical and literary contexts, contending with the nature of literary influence as they examine Roth’s indebtedness to literary predecessors, as well as his friendships and correspondences with other writers. In a similar vein, Paule Lévy considers Roth’s work within a history of literary humor, tracing the development of Roth’s own unique brand of comic seriousness. The section culminates with a chapter by James Bloom that places Roth within a tradition of writers writing about writing, who meditate on the purpose and place of fiction, and the responsibilities of the writer.

The second section addresses critical contexts of Roth’s novels, providing overviews of the critical reception of Roth’s work and particular benchmarks of his career – information that also highlights the recurring and shifting themes in his novels. Ira Nadel focuses on the circumstances and reception that shaped Roth’s early career, while Pia Masiero addresses the subsequent controversy surrounding the publication of Portnoy’s Complaint. As they study Roth’s work further in this critical framework, David Hadar, Mike Witcombe, Gurumurthy Neelakantan, and Victoria Aarons provide important context for the intentional grouping of Roth’s
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novels into specific categories (the Zuckerman books; the Kepesh books; the Roth books; and the Nemeses Tetralogy) – categorizations that Roth himself encouraged, and which are now reprinted in the front matter of each of his novels reissued by Random House. Taken together, this collection of chapters reveals how reception to Roth and his work has taken shape over the years, and how his fictional treatment of recurring subject matter changes across each of these categorizations.

Part III turns to geographical contexts, examining the places that figure centrally in Roth’s life and fiction. Jessica Lang writes about the influence of Newark, where Roth himself grew up and which often manifests as a kind of character itself in his novels; Daniel Anderson considers the place of the Berkshires in rural Massachusetts, where Roth spent more of his time later in life, and to which his protagonist and alter ego Nathan Zuckerman also retreats in his later years; Claudia Franziska Brühwiler studies the importance of Prague (and Eastern Europe more broadly), which Roth regularly visited in the 1970s, during which time he worked to publish the writing of Czech writers living under a totalitarian regime; and finally, Leona Toker contends with the place of Israel and the representation of Zionist politics in Roth’s work.

Part IV moves on to examine some of the key theoretical underpinnings of Roth’s work. Maren Scheurer provides context for the central role of psychoanalysis; Michael Kalisch reflects on Roth’s position within postmodernism; and Aimee Pozorski and Miriam Jaffe demonstrate how an understanding of trauma theory and narrative medicine, respectively, can help readers better understand Roth’s engagement with history, identity, empathy, and mortality.

The sections that follow take up additional historical, cultural, and theoretical contexts of Roth’s work, with Part V focusing on the ongoing conversations about Roth and Jewish American identity. On more than one occasion, Roth rejected the label of “Jewish American writer,” preferring instead to be recognized simply as an American writer. Still, the subject of Jewishness – and its racial, cultural, and religious dimensions – exists at the center of nearly all of Roth’s novels. In this section, Jennifer Glaser, Hilene Flanzbaum, Jacques Berlinerblau, Gustavo Sánchez Canales, Brett Ashley Kaplan, and Naomi Taub all examine different angles of this complicated topic. Then, in Part VI, Debra Shostak, David Brauner, and I home in on issues pertaining to gender and sexual identity. Roth’s engagement with these topics has been the source of much debate – and much controversy – over the years; in light of this, each of the chapters in this section examines the cultural mores...
and conversations that shaped both Roth’s representations of these subjects and the public response.

While the aforementioned sections contend with identity politics, Part VII will address the the politics of American governance and national identity, beginning with David Gooblar’s coverage of the subject of political satire – its definition, its evolution in Roth’s writing, and its importance in understanding Roth’s engagement with American politics more generally. Thereafter, Andy Connolly and Brittany Hirth examine class politics and American individualism, respectively, their chapters entering into conversation with one another as they examine the consequences of faulty ideas of American exceptionalism that come to bear on middle class Jewish-American immigrant families in post-World War II America. The section closes with Margaret Scanlan’s consideration of Roth’s work in light of the War on Terror after 9/11, and its problematic connections to American political support for Israel.

The volume will conclude with meditations on Roth’s legacy. In many ways, all sections in this volume address some element of Roth’s legacy, as they assess the work he has bequeathed to his readers and literary inheritors. However, this final section will address the concept of “legacy” in terms of the way Roth’s work lives on, morphing and developing via translation and adaptation. Gerard O’Donoghue provides an overview of the various film adaptations of Roth’s work, speaking to the inevitable challenges of translating Roth’s work to a different medium. Velichka Ivanova writes about the translation and publication of Roth’s work outside the United States, observing the ways that Roth’s work changes in subtle ways during the translation process. The final two chapters, appropriately, reflect on Roth’s own attempts to ascertain and even control his own legacy both by writing about himself and, eventually, by becoming a reader of his own work. “Not everyone can be fruitful forever,” he said after announcing his retirement from writing. Still, the relevance and impact of his work continue to live on, providing readers with nuanced, insightful, creative ways to consider not just the American predicament, but also nothing short of “humanity in its particularity.”

Notes

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4 Roth, “Interview with *Svenska Dagbladet,*” *WW,* 385.
5 Roth,” The Ruthless Intimacy of Fiction,” *WW,* 393.