THE LITERARY IMAGINATION: DIMENSIONS OF A PROGRESSIVE EVOLUTION

CHAPTER V
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_The Counterlife_ is a narrative in which there is an apparently relentless attempt to eviscerate both the text and the narrator-subject's self by substructuring the main preoccupations of being a jew and creative writer simultaneously. What the reader confronts is the discursively sculpted "idea of a counterlife, counterlives" and "counterliving". Roth himself highlights that the basic edifice of the novel lies in the device of introducing a new story or version of reality against what precedes it:

"We are all writing fictitious versions of our lives all the time, contradictory but mutually entangling stories [. . . ]" (Milbauer and Watson, An Interview 253). Each of the five segments represents a fresh start and the reader is hard put to resume his perusal from an entirely different sjuzet. But, at the same time one cannot and should not shun from the mind what has gone before.

The text changes voice and tone to put the reader into Nathan Zuckerman's frame of perception and also into those of the other subjects in the novel. The reader also, in the course of reading, re-creates himself through encounters with many probable selves. Like a detective stumbling on to rash conclusions, the reader is forced to shift from one perspective to another by
acquiring indeterminate insights into the problematic of being a modern Jew and a creative writer. The central concern is the puzzle of Nathan's physical survival as a family man within a Jewish space. Alongside this puzzle he is also faced with the imperative of defining the contours of his authenticity as a writer who keeps his self engaged with the hermeneutics of history, fiction and reality.

Nathan and his brother, Henry attempt, at various levels, to interpret their selves and their Jewishness. Nathan's predicament is more excruciating as it involves not mere religiosity but a productive dialectic between his individualistic Jewishness and his vocation as a writer.

Alan Cooper, in his distinctively titled essay, "Zuckerroth" describes him as a "maturing, musing Nathan" who is discerned as "plumbing his own character" and "inducing readers to discover theirs" (214).

Nathan appears to wend his way to truth through five segments that are dense with impersonation and dialectical conflicts. He tells his younger brother Henry that "the treacherous imagination is everybody's maker - we are all the invention of each other, everybody a conjuration, conjuring up everyone else" (CL 145). In the novel, the self gets elevated to the position of a theatrical space where "the question of authority over one's life is explored in a more philosophical and self-conscious manner" (Lyons 190). The drama of the self gets evolved through the sections, "Basel," "Judea," "Aloft,"
"Gloucestershire," and "Christendom." Perceptibly enough, in all these sections, the older pastoral ideal of the unified, linear and conflictless world is repudiated as unhistorical and unbecoming of the Jewish diasporic dilemma. The pastoral ideal of a cohesive world is only echoed through ventriloqual voice through which Nathan realizes that what he has been describing is "people divided in themselves" (CL 320). This, he knows, is the "absolute opposite" of the "idea of emotional integration." He goes on to explain to his imagined wife, Maria, that as according to the "Western idea of mental health" what is covetable is the harmony between "self consciousness" and "natural being" (CL 320). The repudiation of the pastoral ideal seems to have been effected because of its inherent inability to embody conflictual situations. It rather would embody the dream of a return to the primordial past or a complete escape from history.

Nathan perceives an unseen but umbilical relationship between the Jews and the anti-pastoral which he wants to bring out as a textual construct. As such, he strives to preclude all the elements that constitute the pastoral in the older Western sense of the term. To him, the Judean pastoral appears to perpetrate an escapist tendency: "Fleeing now, and back to day zero and the first untainted settlement - breaking history's mold and casting off the dirty, disfiguring reality of the piled-up years: this is what Judea means to, of all people, that belligerent, unillusioned little band of Jews [. . .] (CL 322)."
He, in sharp contrast to such a pastoral romantic nostalgia builds up an anti-pastoral discourse which, like a Jewish joke, “pictures a wholly deconsecrated world: demystified, deromanticized, utterly dedeluded” (Roth, *Reading 7*).

The contradictions and conflicts that the text stages could be seen as responses to the discursive propositions about the Jew and his tradition. The metafictional strategy of the novel appears to be well in tune with the depiction of the multivalent historicity of the Jewish race spread across America and Israel in the present and the nineteen sixties. Metafiction comes to be a method of discourse that could bring about a better link between the metaphysical aspects of reality and the commonplace constraints of life.

Joseph Cohen calls *The Counterlife* a “post-Einsteinian” text:

Through the literary adaptations of Einstein’s relativity theory, linearity is theoretically reduced to absurdity, the distinctions between past, present and future are cast aside, simultaneity is legitimated, the principle of casuality is negated, the certainty of accurate observation and analysis is deposed (the Heisenberg principle) and reality is interpreted in a totally subjective way.

(201-202)

It is this dreamlike subjectivity that understructures *The Counterlife*. Time and space become relative and cause effect relations get diffused. Henry
and Nathan Zuckerman carry on with their lives even after each of them dies during open-heart surgery. Time and characterization become rigorously discontinuous and are presented in the form of a mosaic-like structure. Perhaps the unilinear progression of history is not found to be suitable to the narrative that has the Jewish Diaspora as one of its major focalized themes.

In the twentieth century, the dialectic between individual and the society appears to have been replaced by, on the one side, an apparent urge for "egalitarian community" (a pan-Judaic community within the context of the novel), and on the other side, "a growing sense of alienation from such community", a "sense of exile" brought about by social or spiritual dilemma (Docherty 256). Dilemma faced by Diasporic characters, Nathan, Henry, Shuki, and Lippman, to a considerable extent, seems to be reflected in their characterization and structuration in the text of *The Counterlife*. In his essay, "Characters, Religion, and Politics," Docherty perceptively attempts to explain how the fundamental tropes of Judaism "provide useful models for fictive characterization" (257). He points out that Judaism lacks a supreme author like idol that is similar to Christ in Catholicism. Moses and Prophets form the central part of the Jew’s religion. The text of *The Decalogue* is more of a bricoleur to be interrupted side by side with the other prophetic writings. The modern trend in the religion has been the follower’s active involvement in the recreation of the Law. Adin Steinsaltz in *The Essential Talmud,*
considers the Jewish holy book as indeterminate and compares it to “a living organism”:

Although the organism has taken on this final form, it still produces new shoots that draw sustenance from the roots and continue to grow [. . .]. The principle that the Talmud is unfinished hold out a constant challenge to continue the work of creation. It is incumbent on every scholar to add to the Talmud and to contribute to the work, although it can never be finally completed. (Qtd. in Docherty 258)

This kind of interpretation of the Talmudic discourse could safely lead the reader of a text to a state of subjectivity where he could not find an individual authorial self in a literary text too. Dialogue becomes the organizing principle of literature. There could be no one authentic reader too. Readers are conceived of as a community that has a certain degree of potential for escape from exile of the wilderness of words to the radiance of meaning and comprehension. The formation of the state of Israel in every “interpretative/ creative act” of reading the text allows scope for the Jew “to return home” (Docherty 258). But what ultimately happens is a loss of the individual self in the larger cause of the community (like Judaism here). Perhaps the thematic of the Jewish diaspora, in terms of fiction, provides a steadfast model to the novel that problematizes “Jewish mores, Jewish
intensity and emotionalism, Jewish-Christian relationships, the role of the Jew as writer in contemporary America” and “the conflicting myriad viewpoints of the Israelis” (Cohen 202).

Against such a quasi-religious backdrop the text will be analyzed under the topic-comment structure of the self-effacing Jew in the first half of this study. History and literature are two modes of representation of reality and also two spaces for inhabitation. The Hebrew culture still continues to be a force in Jewish American literature because it has its “dwelling in words”. The Hebrew culture is said to be fundamentally “anti-autochthonous” and reluctant to “locate Yahweh in shrines, hilltops, or altars” (Fredericksen 37). It, on the contrary, is said to be heavily reliant upon the Book and the written word which keep the followers together. The Hebrews are presumed to have shared a common spirit of life through the ceaseless flux of written narratives. Literature provides them scope for imaginative life; laws give order and right vision; and history allows interpretation of time and reality. Written words seem to be used as a powerful means to counter the harsh realities of life. For the Hebrews, the Book endures as it embodies written words that are “added to, rewritten, and commented upon in a process” which spans “hundreds of years” (Fredericksen 37).

As the Book got to be written and rewritten several times the culture appears to be underpinned with what Silverman calls “writerliness.” The
Counterlife could safely be placed within the category of writerly texts. It seems to be constrained to adopt a wide range of fictional strategies for it addresses itself to the problematic of defining Jewishness. The text also harnesses a wide range of models of being a Jew. The point of departure is the polemic “between champions of the secular, even hedonistic pleasures of Diaspora life and super nationalist ideals in Israel” (Sokoloff 74). Nathan becomes the focal point of all arguments and counter-arguments. In Israel, the Zionist Leader Mordecai Lippman makes the charge that the Diaspora Jews lead an aberrant life of psychic disintegration because of men like Nathan. He appears to be ridden with contradictions on materialistic, spiritual, familial, and professional planes:

I was the American-Born grandson of simple Galician tradesmen who, at the end of the last century, had on their own reached the same prophetic conclusion as Theodor Herzl – that there was no future for them in Christian Europe, that they couldn’t go on being themselves there without inciting to violence ominous forces against which they hadn’t the slightest means of defense. But instead of struggling to save the Jewish people from destruction by founding a homeland in the remote corner of the Ottoman Empire that had once been biblical Palestine, they simply set out to save their own Jewish skins. (CL 53)
Through a series of such musings and conversations held in Israel and America, and through letters exchanged between the Zuckerman brothers and an Israeli named Shuki, the text brings out the subjects’ interpretations of themselves and of one another. Each constructs the other according to his subjective frame of understanding, while also effecting his own self-definition. The consequence of all this is a proliferation of invented Jewishness. The novel is filled with clashing constructs of the Jewish self in which hardly any viewpoint is permitted to score out the others. The two sections that bring into relief the textual phenomenon of the self-effacing Jew are “Judea” and “Aloft”. They could be said to serve as the two nuclei that develop the narrative hypogram of Jewishness through a series of opposing fictional subjects, the most significant being the two Israelis. The first is Shuki Elchanan, a liberal urbane journalist who feels himself to be “politically impotent, morally torn apart, and weary to death of being angry with everyone,” yet he feels “an inescapable identification with Israel’s struggle” (CL 161,158). This doubt-ridden Jew is countered by Lippman, a Jewish ultranationalist who has a conviction that all non-Jews shun Jews, that Arabs understand only force, and that the homeland he fights for is Judea.

The segment “Judea” is woven into the family story of Nathan who happens to be in Israel as a mature subject with the intent of bringing his brother Henry back from messianic Zionism to a happy settled life with wife and children in New Jersey. He meets his old friend Shuki who asks a crucial
question: “Why do you pretend to be so detached from your Jewish feelings? In the books all you seem to be worrying about is what on earth a Jew is, while in life you pretend that you’re content to be the last link in the Jewish chain of being”. Nathan quips that it is a part of “Diaspora abnormality” (CL 73). But Shuki, in the last eighteen years, seems to have matured in his views about Israel. He argues that abnormality is nowhere as intense as it is in Israel which, now has turned into “the Jewish obsessional prison par excellence!”. The homeland too appears to have veered away from fulfilling the goal of making everyone a “normal Jew” (CL 77).

Lippman considers all gentiles as people who uphold causes inimical to his, and so, quite simply, rivals. Nathan does not want Henry to be influenced by such fanatical thinking. He perceives the experience of diaspora in a secular way that stands in sharp opposition to Lippman’s conception of it. He thinks that he could be in diaspora even in Israel. Whenever he feels least at home, he is most in diaspora. In a radically articulated statement he points out that “Oriental Jews are brought to Israel to be exploited as an industrial proletariat. Imperialist colonization, capitalist exploitation – all carried on from behind the facade of Israeli democracy and the fiction of Jewish national unity”. In his conversation with Shuki, before meeting Lippman, he adds that he is married to Maria, a non-Jewish divorcee, and now settled in England: “Life is fine there. If it wasn’t for Israel, everything in London would be wonderful” (CL 65).
He hopes that he could confidently carry Zion with him and could be himself regardless of any geographic space. The novel does not seem to provide answers to questions as to where the Jews belong geographically. But it challenges all general beliefs and values that have been celebrated for ages and also the Jew's tendency to feel at home in Israel: "If anything is territorialism, if anything is colonialism, it's Tel Aviv, it's Haifa" (CL 109).

The ironic situation that emerges out of the polemic is that, in Israel, the Jew needs to think more as to how to defend his life; whereas in America, he needs to think little about defending his Jewishness. Shiuki compares the situations in Israel and America in words that point towards this paradox:

Whenever I meet you American-Jewish intellectuals with your non-Jewish wives and your good Jewish brains, well bred, smooth, soft-spoken men, educated men [...] I think exactly that: we are the excitable, ghettoized, jittery little Jews of the Diaspora, and you are the Jews with all the confidence and cultivation that comes of feeling at home where you are. (CL 74).

Before visiting Lippman, Nathan travels to Agor to see Henry at the school where he gets trained himself to be a Zionist Jew. Henry is renamed Hanoch there for the new place is his refuge "from his history" and "from everything else purged from his life" (CL 99).
Henry, after a bypass surgery, had gone on a vacation to Eilat and also had happened to visit Mea She' arim, the orthodox neighbourhood of Jerusalem. He came to realize his lack of Jewish identity there and so resolved to "undergo a spiritual bypass to match the physical" (Cooper 223). Having lost the earlier opportunity to shun the New Jersey Jewish life and go to Basel with his shikse, he had decided to settle in Judea as a Zionist. When Nathan meets him he is very much into another life, away from his wife Carol and children.

Aliyah gives him a new identity as Hamoch, a gun-toting devotee of the fanatic Lippman. He is constrained to seek his self in something larger than himself, characterized by religious discipline. Alan Cooper interestingly comments that "the novel's various shiftings of fictive grounds are explorations of bypass like cures for impotence [. . .]" (223). The shifts in position are also attempts to modify life through disentanglements from pressing dilemmas.

Judea, notwithstanding the representation, is not just a place in the Middle East. It also serves as an item of Jewish choice on the list of various possibilities available to a Jew. The present of the articulation of consciousness is not actually a present. It appears to be a process of reinscription of the patches of the past within the space of Judea which in turn may provide the material for another open and divided present. The
section, “Judea” is a narrative corpus where the reader could find penetration by both diachrony and synchrony. David Carroll opines that fiction, when penetrated by both these frames, would present moments of experience that are incoherent because “it is not simply spatial, not simply present, but already within itself historical, carrying along with it traces of the past-the present moment of writing also” (147).

Judea is the primeval tribal state of the Jews. Nathan also, like his brother, seeks his Judea. But for him the thing larger than himself does not turn out to be his new country but his renewed dedication to the reality of fiction – including his own potential to sculpt in words a personal Jewishness. He articulates his ideology of a subjective Jewishness through the arguments with Henry on the subject of the search for the Jewish self:

‘Tell me something, is it at all possible, at least outside of those books, for you to have a frame of reference slightly larger than the kitchen table in Newark? The kitchen table in Newark happens to be the source of your Jewish memories, Henry – this is the stuff we were raised on. It is Dad – though this time round without the doubts, without the hidden deference to the goy and the fear of the goyish mockery. It’s Dad, but the dream- Dad, supersized, raised to the hundredth power [. . .].’ (CL 138)
Nathan intends to undermine his brother’s position by interpreting the loyalty to the leader, Lippman, as subjugation to an imposing father figure. Lippman, in his view, magnifies Henry/Hanoch’s guilt just as their own father had done earlier by alluding to the anachronistic tropes of pogroms and Jewish vulnerability. These are issues which Nathan finds to be rather irrelevant for an understanding of the predicament of contemporary American social and political climate. But Henry estimates that his brother, as a writer, is prone to the reductivist tendency of looking at historical reality through the ahistorical prism of private neurosis. Nathan could comprehend his brother’s zionistic sense of rebellion as nothing more than repressed desires manifesting in a new form against some paternal imago:

Wasn’t what he described as a revolt against the grotesque contortions of the spirit suffered by the galut, or exiled Jew, more likely an extremely belated rebellion against the idea of manhood imposed upon a dutiful and acquiescent child by a dogmatic, super conventional father? (CL 112)

Each charges the other with lack of authenticity, cultivating false values and going away from the real objectives. Shocked by the erosion of sanctity in the secular world, Henry assumes that his brother’s life is not genuinely Jewish. In response to this, Nathan thinks that Henry’s zionistic fervour is sheer counterfeit posturing: “ ‘Look, I’m all for authenticity, but it
can’t begin to hold a candle to the human gift for playacting. That may be the only authentic thing that we *ever* do’” (*CL* 138). Going radically down the roots of middle class Jewish American morals, he further lashes out at the simulated enthusiasm shown by Henry.

Neither the burning lush, nor the golden calf appears to haunt the collective memory of their family. On the contrary he believes that it goes back to “double features at the Roosevelt on Saturday afternoons and Sunday double headers at Ruppert Stadium watching the Newark Bears” (*CL* 133).

Just as Jews construct themselves and one another, so, too, others fantasize Jews. Nathan avers that Hitler’s contemptuous construct of the Jew is similar to Lippman’s attitude towards the Diaspora Jews. Both of them find in the Jew a repulsive aberrance and both condemn the pacifist inclinations and humanistic principles found in a Jew. What Lippman encourages and foments in an ideology grounded in violence and assertiveness: “The Jew who drives the school bus past the Arabs throwing stones at his windscreen, he does not *dream* of violence- he *faces* violence, he *fights* violence. We do not dream about force- we *are* force” (*CL* 127).

The polemic between Nathan and Lippman raises the issue of Jewishness to a dialectical proportion. A friendly dinner becomes an occasion for Lippman to launch a strong defense of Israeli nationalism. He opposes Shuki’s values as those of “niceys and goodies” of Tel Aviv who simply want
to be "humane," who are "embarrassed by the necessities of survival in a jungle" (CL 166). The Jewish weakness disguised as Jewish morality is anathema to him. Backed up by his wife Ronit, and friends, Buki and Daphna, he advocates stiff resistance to those he considers "Hellenized Jews" and to Arabs who want to see Israel obliterated (CL 117).

They do not want to crush the Arabs but would not let them crush the Jews. Lippman is in favour of coexistence but strongly opposes Arab statehood within the Israeli borders: "You can put the State of Israel seven times into the state of Illinois, but it is the only place on the entire planet where a Jew can have the experience of statehood, and that is why we do not give ground!" (CL 129).

Against such vehement pronouncements Nathan upholds his concept of subjective creation of history. The section is full of contradictory posturings and they seem to delight the reader with kaleidoscopic ideas on Jewishness. Perhaps the arguments make better sense among themselves than in reference to an outer reality. Verbal games transcend the realm of referentiality and redirect the reader's interest toward the making of Jewish tropes of exile and Diaspora on the page. Klinkowitz states that in such mode of writing the attention is directed "less toward the conceptualisation of either the thing itself or to what it's compared, and more to the distance between them, the arena of the writer's art" (The Self 33). Realistic tropes that are
appropriated unrealistically in the section “Aloft” frustrate a referential reading, and the reader is hard put to develop strategies against the effacement of words and images within themselves. Klinkowitz is aware of such an impasse the reader confronts in a text, and he goes on to explain the phenomenon in very clear terms: “By blocking what the reader wants to do with words and making this disruption a more and satisfying process to follow, the self-apparent fictionist has taken the genre’s weakest point and made it a tactical strength” (The Self 33).

The section “Aloft” creates a world where temporal and spatial dimensions confuse the reader with alternation of fact and fantasy. Conventional expectations are violated and the text obstructs the referential role of narrative by substituting a simulated world of story. Conceptualisation gets focussed on the story’s own structure rather than its message about the Jews and their world.

The segment appears to be more of an interlude, a fantasy of Nathan’s return from Tel Aviv abroad El Al flight 315. the debate on a Jew’s transformation now takes place on an epistolary plane. Writing of his concern for Henry’s newly constructed identity, he states that it was formed by “an imagination richer with reality” than his own. It is Lippman’s powerful imagination that seems to have re-constituted his self in its new form as a zealous Zionist. “We are all each other’s authors” (CL 145).
The letters drafted "aloft/E1 A1" form an elaborate hermeneutic code to the understanding of the intricacies of the text and its thematic concerns. The very spatial setting that is physically distanced from the mainland seems to be highly suggestive of the Jew's inviolable consciousness of exile and wilderness. It is again in the tropal space of the desert "the cult is forged, the laws (written laws) are given, the covenant is renewed, and where the people act out in microcosm their history of being chosen, backsliding, being chastised, and renewing commitment (Fredericksen 37-38). The formative experience, as far as a Jew is concerned, is that of leaving his city or civilization and wandering in a land of wilderness. Taking cue from this tropical paradigm of Jewish Diasporic experience, it could be argued that, in the text, the spatial setting of "Aloft/ E1 A1" is similar to a wilderness from where Nathan tries to reinforce and explicate in clearer terms his ideas about the Jew and Jewishness. In traditional thinking, the desert forms the "home of absence, a vast space where nothing is contained" (Fredericksen 38). The Jew is supposed to go to desert to lose his civilization and himself. By doing so he finds a renewed self in a state of absence or nothingness. Similarly, the epistolary trope too appears to be suggestive of the empty space of the text that provides Nathan an opportunity to remould his ideas in a better way. A desert is occupied by shifting sands and endless possibility. Likewise, the text provides Nathan ample scope for ceaseless frames and perspectives of narration.
From the Jewish point of view, “both desert and Book are figural spaces which can represent Yahweh [. . .]” (Fredericksen 38). To write is an exile and writing also serves as a home for the self/ being. What a Jew needs is the exile from the voice of the spoken word. Basically, exile is not intended here as a means of tormentation. Nathan appropriates the condition of exile as a unique experience that could facilitate living in the indeterminacy of interpretation. He thinks that the Jew could be located in the literary words of the text: “The construction of a counter life that is one’s own antimyth was at its very core. It was a species of fabulous utopianism, a manifesto for human transformation as extreme – and, at the outset, as implausible – as any ever conceived. A Jew could be a new person if he wanted to” (CL 147).

The imagined exchange of letters among Nathan, Henry and Shuki builds scope for multivalent perspectives on the Jew and Judaism. This is a unit where Nathan, has domination as the narrator. As he composes and re-reads letters he makes definitive views about everything that happens around. Long distance correspondence makes way for single sided communication in the imagination. Letters are only simulated but neither sent nor answered, and so the polimic remains unresolved. The dramatic action, on the whole, enacts the principle he elucidates- authoring of other’s selves.

Shuki’s letter points out the problem that Nathan faces. Nathan is imaged as a “writer with a strong proclivity for exploring serious, even grave,
subjects through their comic possibilities” (CL 157-158). Even the Jews’ vulnerability is treated by him as hilarious and ironic. Shuki intends Nathan to become aware of the overwhelming danger of the potential for comic hyperbole which could lead anyone to gross cynicism. Comicality, he believes, is not always suitable to comprehend reality: “At the symposium here in 1960 you were condemned from the audience by a vociferous American-born Israeli citizen for being unforgivably blind in your fiction to the horror of Hitler’s slaughter [. . .]” (CL 162).

Henry’s counterlife of robust manhood in Israel and the Diaspora Jew’s probable counterlife of robust Jewishness in America are compared and contrasted in the letter that Nathan conceives of writing. Israel is described as an utopian state where the Jews are most likely to divest themselves of all their Jewishness and live as ordinary men and women. Moreover, this becomes a self-justificatory argument that legitimates his personal choice of diaspora Counterlife. Alongside a self-justification, he advocates a sense of history that does not demand a straitjacket submissiveness to any essentialist ideology: “History doesn’t have to be made the way a mechanic makes a car – one can play a role in history without its having to be obvious, even to oneself” (CL 146).

The stasis of this polemic which does not reach a point of consummation in the text is suddenly disrupted by the comic fantasy of a
hijack attempt by Jimmy Lustig, a Jew from New Jersey, whom Nathan had met at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. Jimmy seeks Nathan’s help for the hijack and his endeavour to force the Israeli government to close down Yad Vashem, the Museum of the Holocaust in Jerusalem. He insists that Jews should achieve deliverance from their super-ego by the advocacy of “Forget Remembering”:

ISRAEL NEEDS NO HITLERS FOR THE RIGHT TO BE
ISRAEL!
JEWS NEED NO NAZIS TO BE THE REMARKABLE
JEWISH PEOPLE!
ZIONISM WITHOUT AUSCHWITZ!
JUDAISM WITHOUT VICTIMS!
THE PAST IS PAST! WE LIVE! (CL 165)

Two Israeli security agents drag Jimmy and Nathan and torture them until they are exhausted. The officers make them realise how seriously ineffaceable the Jewish id of the Holocaust is:

You think it’s the Jewish superego they hate? They hate the Jewish id! What right do these Jews have to have an id? The Holocaust should have taught them never to have an id again. That’s what got them into trouble in the first place! You think because of the Holocaust they think we’re better? (CL 178)
As apart from dealing with the problematic of defining the Jew and Judaism, the text can also be read as one that involves itself in a dialectical conflict with the process of creating a plot/structure. It is a fiction about the invented worlds of fiction and the life of their inventor. By thematizing the structure in the novel, the narrative shatters all conventions and also dispels the notion of the unitary self by multiplying stories about/of self. Fiction is opened out to ponder over its own making.

Nathan’s decentred/indeterminate self challenges the reader to shed all anxiety of the interpretive act as it foregrounds the duplicity of reality as well as language. The novel, as a whole, could be looked upon a metafictional exercise with an anachronistic commitment to the reformulation of the self-effacing real. The Freudian notions of cause and effect seem to trouble the relationship between reality and fiction within the textual realm. Debra Shostak comments on the metafictional paradox in the novel: “The ‘reality’ of the novel is nothing but its fictiveness, its multiplication of possible realities, while at the same time its fictions are presented at participating in concrete, gritty and comic examples of felt life, much in the style of mainstream American realism” (199).

Nathan, as an actor-self in the narrative explores the diffuse boundaries of textuality and also the question of subjectivity itself. Right in the first segment “Basel” itself the novel emplots the premise of textual desire
through the explicit trope of Henry’s sexual desire. The actions of “Basel” take place in New Jersey; only thing Swiss about the narrative segment is Wendy, a former mistress of Henry. She is Henry’s lost opportunity to escape from middle class Jewish family life. She is based on an early affair Henry had confided to Nathan. The manuscript account of Henry’s affair reveals the fact that he suffers cardiac arrest and beta-blocker induced impotence. He figures in Nathan’s imagination as a symbol of quixotic desire. The childhood memory about Henry is associated with his sleepwalking “out of his room, down the stairs, out the door, and into the street [. . .]” (CL 15). On another occasion, “he was in his coffin, the sleepwalking boy” (CL 16).

The text alludes to erotic desire when it opens with Nathan constructing his brother’s decision to undergo bypass surgery. In a unit typographically set off from the section “Basel,” Henry is projected as desperately impotent for he cannot enjoy his dental assistant Wendy’s wild passion. Henry’s secret desire is revealed in the language of narrative construction: “He reminded himself of the terrible unruliness spawned by unconstrainable desire – the plotting, the longing, the crazily impetuous act, the dreaming relentlessly of the other, and when one of these bewitching others at last becomes the clandestine mistress, the intrigue and anxiety and deception” (CL6).
Henry wants to revitalize his own life by a heart surgery but dies during the operation. In Freudian terms, this initiatory event of Henry’s death is the point of departure of Nathan’s narrative. The reader who looks upon the incident from the Freudian point of view, would find that Henry is Nathan’s double, the figure in Nathan’s dream-novel who represents himself: “In a way brothers probably know each other better than they every know anyone else.’ ‘How they know each other, in my experience, is a kind of deformation of themselves’” (CL 80).

Nathan contemplates the purport of erotic desires as well as that of the death of the self. Perhaps the death of the self is fictionalised both as being deceased and as the disintegration of the unitary self. The paradox of bringing in the tropes of both regeneration and degeneration could be understood better if it is read with the help of Thomas Docherty’s idea regarding the existence of a binary desire in fiction:

In general terms the desiring engenders a quest for something positive, procreative and generative, or it is manifest in a hope for the end of questing, for something negative, destructive, and retrogressive [...] the satisfaction of desire seems to the closely connected to death, the death of desiring subject. The subject seems to be real only in so far as it is deferred or projected towards a future. (224 – 225)
What is discernible in the segment “Basel” is a play of “the erotic” and “the thanatic.” Textual desire gets fictively transformed into sexual desire. Henry’s imagined death is a fantasy by means of which Nathan tries to overcome the anxiety over his own death. But this fantasy gets reversed in the fourth segment “Gloucestershire” where he himself dies after an unsuccessful surgery. The quest for counterlives ends with the textual thanatos that Nathan reaches in the fourth unit. By the end of the fifth segment “Christendom”, he attains a sort of immortality provided by textuality. The narrator-subject’s fears and desires get displaced: “Fantasy is speculation that is characteristically you, the you with your dream of self-overpowering, the you perennially bonded to your prize wish, your pet fear that he’d annihilated from his mental processes” (CL 235). The construct of counterlives helps Nathan to analyse his erotic desires, his death, and the disintegration of his self or rather the multitude of selves.

In the enactment of the segmented counterstories the self is not reported but prolonged. Silverman argues that “the writerly text replaces the concepts of ‘product’ and ‘structure’ with those of ‘process’ and ‘segmentation’ ” (247). These replacements transform the experience of textuality. Segmentation attracts the reader to the junctures which suture the pieces together. It lays stress on the autonomy of each of the textual units. Segmentation not only demystifies the classic text, but nourishes it greatly. Signification gets denser with ceaseless digressions and interpolations.
The text weaves out its circuitous sjuzet with an abundant use of repetition and inversion. Debra Shostak draws ideas from Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* to explain that “repetition compulsion refers to the compulsive acting out of repressed traumatic experiences in an effort to master the trauma: repetition makes the experience familiar, bringing it from the unconscious, through memory, into consciousness” (202). “Gloucestershire” offers a counterlife in which Nathan suffers in place of Henry and also dies. Carol is substituted by Maria, the wife of his upstairs neighbour. Nathan falls in love with her and wants to marry her and rear children. He is forced to be satisfied with a one-sided affair. Maria’s main accusation against her secret lover is:

You have a defiant intelligence: you like turning resistance to your own advantage. Opposition determines your direction. You would probably never have written those books about Jews if Jews hadn’t insisted on telling you not to. You only want a child now because you can’t. (*CL* 188)

The narrative unit is again full of the repetition of oppositions, contrasts, and counterlives as in “Basel,” “Judea”, and “Aloft.”

The impotent Nathan wonders as to why Maria stays in relationship with him. She gives a paradoxical reply: “‘I mean that without the physical commitment somehow a woman like me feels stronger” (*CL* 197). Their age
difference too is a source of mutual attraction as it is a young twenty seven year old woman in love with a forty five year old gentleman. She too is a writer, a “hackette” who pens “fluent cliches and fluffy ephemera for silly magazines” (CL 189). She apprehends that he has already started transforming herself by inventing a woman who doesn’t exist” (CL 191). He has not started this as the subsequent turn of events show.

Restoration of health and potency for the consummation of his relationship with Maria becomes the strongest motive that leads him to bypass surgery: “If I can have this wonderfully bruised, supercivilized woman, I can be recovered from my affliction fully” (CL 203). He is beset with a “purely mythic endeavour, a defiant, dreamlike quest for the self-emancipating act, posessed by an intractable idea of how [his] existence is to be fulfilled [. . .] (CL 205). But the surgery turns out to be a failure. Henry too gets his turn to find himself unable to read the eulogy on his brother. The young editor delivers the eulogy praising Nathan’s earlier novel Carnovsky. Henry later learns that Nathan himself had, before death, composed his eulogy extolling his novel. He also discovers Nathan’s notebooks and chapters of the book The Counterlife. Henry finds himself represented in bad light in the drafts of “Basel” and “Judea.”

On reading them he is prompted to make a categorical declaration: “Of all the classics of irresponsible exaggeration, this was the filthiest, most
recklessly irresponsible of all” (CL 226). Henry leaves with more than two hundred and fifty pages of the manuscript, and keeps undisturbed certain portions of “Aloft” and the whole of the section “Christendom”.

Henry’s discovery reveals certain contradictory facts that are demeaning to Nathan’s writer-self. The segment provides Henry or rather Nathan provides himself an opportunity to comprehend how his readers perceive the positions he takes in his novelistic discourse. Henry affirms that his brother was using him “to conceal himself while simultaneously disguising himself as himself [Nathan], as responsible, as sane, disguising himself as a reasonable man while [Henry is] revealed as the absolute dope” (CL 226-227).

The novel remarks about itself both “retrospectively and prospectively” and effects alteration, falsification, exaggeration, and fictionalization of everything and everyone (Halio 192). To a great extent, it could also be read as a commentary on the ontological status of fictional discourse and the role of the writer who remains highly elusive. Patricia Waugh, while trying to answer the question, “Are novelists liars?” makes the following statement about the “creation/description paradox” in metafiction:

Metafiction not only exposes the inauthenticity of the realist assumption of simple extension of the fictive into the real world; it also fails deliberately to provide its readers with sufficient or
sufficiently consistent components for him or her to be able to construct a satisfactory alternative world. Frames are set up only to be continually broken. Contexts are ostentatiously constructed, only to be subsequently deconstructed. (101)

The metafictional writers usually eschew positions of falsity. As Nathan/Roth would insist, they construct through language an imaginative world with full referential status as an alternative to the world of reality. Fictional discourse exists and has its "truth" within the corpus of the alternative world. Statements of the real world have their "truth" in the setting of a world which they help to create.

Fictional text is merely a different matrix of "frames," a different matrix of conventions and constructions. In this perspective, a novelistic subject is 'unreal' in one sense, but subjects who are not persons are still "real" and they exist within their particular worlds.

Metafictional texts "reveal the ontological status of all literary fiction: its quasi-referentiality, its indeterminacy, its existence as words and world" (Waugh 101). By frequent shifts in and revelations of context, they emphasize the paradox of creation and description. The more a text lays emphasis on linguistic constraints, the more is it removed from the common milieu of everyday life presented by realistic fiction. It reveals the fact that literary fiction can never imitate or represent the world in its real form but always
imitates or represents the discourses which facilitate the construction of that world. However, this does not mean that there is absolute autonomy from reality for the alternative world of fiction. Notwithstanding the fact they are linguistic constructs far removed from everyday reality, they still always implicitly evoke the happenings and settings of common reality.

About the overall structure of *The Counterlife*, Halio remarks that “the novel doubles back upon itself, once, twice, three times, providing counterlives to counterlives, countereulogies to countereulogies [. . .]” (192). This kind of an overall structure is controlled mainly by speculative repetitions. The overall pattern becomes all the more evident when the reader reaches the last segment, “Christendom.” Each of the five segments effects a change on the prominent trope of flight or escape. The tropal figure of physical death is seen to be centre upon which all repetitions are grounded. Nathan, from the beginning till the end, fears mortality. In other words, his fear could be seen as that of losing his self the Other who might wear a multitude of faces – the lover, the gentile, or the political state. The text lacks linearity in progression, and each segment either replaces or supplements the one that has gone before as a probable construction of inverted, or extended narrative semes.

In “Basel,” Henry desires to escape by means of the *shikse*, Wendy who is a forbidden erotic object. He desires to achieve his sense of being by
objectifying the other, and building the power of his own subjectivity. In “Judea,” Henry’s escape is “from the folly of sex, from the intolerable disorder of virile pursuits and the indignities of secrecy and betrayal” to assert a “transpersonal, historical self” (*CL* 132; Shostak 205). The trope of the crazy flight in “Aloft” tries to categorise and define the “normal” and “abnormal” selves of the Jew. “Gloucestershire” again deals with the erotic, but here the desire is displaced into language and textuality. The escape is toward the mode of existence offered by textuality which is beyond the rules of time or mortality. The final unit, “Christendom” introduces an assimilationist fantasy of an escape into domesticity. It presents Nathan’s imagined life with pregnant Maria. She represents the genteel and serene domestic culture of a refined English family. His life with Maria in England is an escape from his cultural alienation from Judaism, home and family.

Narrative repetitions in the text become relevant when they are seen as intrinsically metonymic substitutions that bring about counter-progressions at the level of characterization and structural constitution. Repetitions take place between Henry’s initiatory death in “Basel” and Nathan’s textual demise at the end of “Christendom”. Between these two points in the narrative, the preoccupations that recur regard the themes of impotence and erotic relationship, death and health, Jewishness and Christendom, and normality and abnormality of the self. The devices of repetition and inversion are significant from a Freudian perspective on narrativity. The compulsion
towards repetitiveness could refer to "the compulsive acting out of repressed traumatic experience in an effort to master the trauma: repetition makes the experience familiar, bringing it from the unconscious" (Shostak 202). It is basically through metonymic representation that the text binds together its diverse themes and energies. Peter Brooks, in his essay "Freud's Masterplot", argues that metonymy is the pivotal figure of narrative: "The description of narrative needs metonymy as the figure of movement, of linkage in the signifying chain, of the slippage of the signified under the signifier" (281).

The beginning anticipates the end, and it is in this pattern that one could read through the five chapters of *The Counterlife*. The reader reads the incidents of narration as signs of promise and annunciation enchainment metonymically toward a construction of significance. The sense of beginning ("Basel") gets determined by the sense of an ending ("Christendom"). Brooks adds that "all narration is obituary in that life acquires definable meaning only at, and through, death" (Brooks 284). Between the two poles of life and death the repetitive phenomenon occurs as a chain of metonymic representations: "Narrative always makes the implicit claim to be in a state of repetition, as a going over again of a ground already covered: a sjuzet repeating the fabula [...]

The novel opens with Nathan's imagined but undelivered three thousand word eulogy. The first authorized version is the one that is accepted by Carol and also apparently approved of by the text as it is placed in the first
chapter after Nathan's italicized musings that give a different version about Henry. But, later in the chapter, Nathan imagines that he hears from Carol too about Henry's sexual escapades. The second composition of eulogy is for Nathan himself who dies in the fourth unit. This eulogy is not a justification of erotic desire but of fiction's appropriation of fabula from real life.

Henry's liaison with Maria is recorded in Nathan's journal. He uses Maria as a material. She becomes more of a prototypical object of his erotic desire. She gets transformed into an English lady in the last two segments of the text. She appears to be a fiction, and Nathan the narrating subjectivity. He keeps himself in her company to tell her tale and also to invent it in so many ways he like. As she once observes, he wishes to "rise in exuberant rebellion against [his] author and remake [his] life" (CL 313). In "Christendom," Nathan reconstructs Maria's mother as an ordinary woman, and Sarah, her sister, as an anti-Semitic. English anti-Semitism becomes a thematic concern in their conversation at a restaurant where they eat and celebrate Maria's twenty eighth birthday. A quarrel arises between the husband and the wife over this matter. She threatens to divorce him and also charges him with the act of reinventing the issue of anti-Semitism on the provocation by an experience with one of his previous wives. In her long anguished monologue, she compares him to Mordecai Lippman, the fanatic Zionist. Jewishness never allows him to go scotfree as it becomes the focus and centre of his existence as well as of his marriage. He wonders if he is a "paranoid Jew attaching
false significance to a manageable problem requiring no more than commonsense to defuse – if [he] wasn’t making them all stand for far too much and over imagining everything [. . .]” (CL 307).

Maria leaves him after writing a letter. She is apprehensive of what he might do to her daughter Phoebe. If he could kill Henry, kill himself and construct the hijack episode he could even make Phoebe the object of an interesting text. She is at pains to realise that Nathan is incorrigibly preoccupied with an “irresolvable conflict” (CL 313). It appears “boring and regressive and crazy” for Nathan to be madly associated with a community into which he “simply happened to have been born, and a very long time ago at that” (CL 314).

In the imagined reply to the imagined letter, Nathan discredits the idea of an essential self. He argues that a subject is constrained to take up several roles and “impersonates best the self that best gets one through” (CL 320). He agrees to the charge that pastoral ideals are no more his favourite. He associates circumcision to pastoralism in a strangely convincing manner. Circumcision is believed to be the ultimate means of the Jew to prove that the child is born into the world and out of the womb, or the primordial pastoral environment. Nathan considers that circumcision is the quintessential Jewish mark of reality that “makes it clear as can be that you are out and not in -also that you’re mine and not theirs. There is no way around it: you enter history
through my history and me” (CL 323). Nathan’s secular mask seems to fall off his self and his Jewish pride is out. But still the reader cannot get much hermeneutic clue about Nathan. He appears to sum up the web of the codes of reality and writerliness as well.

All through the text it has been the reversal, displacement and repetition of here/there, out/in, and mine/their. The “no way around it” seems to identify circumcision with circumcision. It is a process of initiation into a world of confrontational plurality as against that of the pastoral’s “strifeless unity” (CL 323). Only in England does Nathan recognise the distinction of being a Jew. Michael Greenstein, with a psychoanalytic perspective, makes striking comment about the trope of the body that erupts in the text towards the end: “Cut off one of Hydra’s heads and regeneration ensures; circumcize the Jew and counterlife begins. In English the signifier "pen" is related to penis (phallogocentrism); in Hebrew, meelah equates word and circumcision as homonyms” (62).

Through their absent foreskins “they are supposed to pursue their forefathers (Greenstein 63). Nathan resorts to die again and embrace oblivion, perhaps in the textual maze of the meelah.
NOTES

1 The writerly text is characterised by a ceaseless play of signification where there is little possibility for the existence of a transcendental signified. Such a text will have no syntagmatic coherence and can be entered at any juncture. See Silverman 246-250.

2 The term "metafiction" seems to have been initiated into critical operation by the American critic and novelist William H.Gass in an essay published in 1970. Metafiction deals with the problem of how man reflects constructs and mediates his experience of the world. It draws on the classical metaphor of the world as a book and recasts the idea of fiction in terms of philosophical, linguistic, or literary theory. See Patricia Waugh 1-19.

3 Freud employs the Greek word "eros" in Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920), to connote all the life instincts as opposed to the death instincts. He wants his readers to substitute this term for sexual instincts to overcome all the derogatory sense allied to it. "Eros" could readily be used as synonym for 'life instinct'. Eventhough Freud does not prominently use the opposite word 'thanatos' in any of his writings, it understandably, could designate the death instinct or the instinct of destructiveness found in his idea of instinctual dualism. See Richard Wollheim 107-126.