CONCLUSION

CHAPTER VI

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Roth’s fictional discourse appear to question all the conventional contract between the author the reader, the subject and the text. They very rarely conform to the literary norms of an Aristotelian narrative as they have “many beginnings, middles, and endings” (Milbauer and Watson 11). What Roth says, in his interview with these two critics, about The Counterlife undoubtedly applies to almost all the five texts analysed in detail in the previous chapters. The five novels appear to be rather fairly representative of the whole corpus of Roth’s fiction. They appear to be representative because almost all the major themes and preoccupations found generally in Roth’s fictional discourse are well focussed upon. The author’s major concerns have been brought under three heads: the family, the state and the literary imagination. From the study of the texts under the three macro-structural units, it is possible, to a considerable extent, to reach certain conclusions regarding the texts, their contexts and their status as the institution of narrative prose fiction. Again, for interpretative convenience and analytical coherence in the conclusion, Roth’s fiction would be considered in terms of the authority or the author; the textual structure; and the constitution of the subject which have come to stay as three formidable entities in contemporary writing.
With the death of the mimetic order of fiction in the last quarter of the twentieth Century, the novel, at present, is faced not with the problem of representing experience through language but with that of experiencing language through a disintegration of the represented reality. Andre Brink expresses the view that the contemporary novels are "amazingly dense intertexts, subsuming within them something of the history of the novel as a genre - reaching back across the centuries [. . .]" (3). Roth has to be placed as an author in such a context where the issues of authority and power are of utmost concern to American writers. Since the eighteenth century, power has been either concentrated or centralized, in social institutions, and political state. In a milieu saturated with power in multifarious forms, almost all citizens are made to share the sense of power and examine its limits and lapses; and also discover its hidden dangers. The author has to perform the role of mediator to preserve or transform the place where he lives. His efforts toward redemption of his environment cannot be separated from an exercise of power that is carried over to the medium of language which is his mighty instrument. In the present circumstances, where language has lost its poetic force, the writer has the responsibility to revitalise words to encompass truth.

But contrary to this, what seems to be coming up as a trend among the modern writers is a structuralist frame of view that goes counter to the modernist traditions of the past one hundred and twenty five years. Charles Russell is of the opinion that "the basis of contemporary stylistic
experimentation or innovation is no longer a belief in an historical directionality grounded in the nineteenth century faith in political and scientific progress" (359). The contemporary novelists tend to adopt the structure of a discourse that is the structure of their desires, illusions, and needs. But it appears to be quiet doubtful as to whether such structures permit scope for the significant expansion of meaning and the propagation of social values. Contemporary literature seeks to move in two main directions. One tries to apprehend how experiential reality is filtered through consciousness or the self. The other course taken by literature is to focus closely upon the prescriptive structures of literary language. Roth appears to have taken the first direction, "to a celebration of the self, which may, in a variety of ways, become his subject, as well as the impetus that establishes the perimeters of his technique" (RM40 135).

Roth’s fiction mainly makes use of the fabula appropriated from the post Korean America’s painful concerns. Psychoanalysis, alienation, erotic-fixations, pornography, urban violence, familial crises, Jewish history and ineffectuality of liberal political ideology all become thematically realised in the novels. Hermione Lee analyses the novelist’s literary evolution in three stages (9-11). Firstly, he is said to have transcended the Jewish cultural ghetto to wider but alien spaces of the world. Secondly he seems to have grown up with the rest of America, from the relative plainness of the fifties to the radical scepticism of the present. Thirdly, but more importantly, his fictional
strategies show a marked change from anecdotal realism to surrealism, pastiche, confessionals, psychic fantasies and to objectified autobiographies. As an author who operates with his discursivity on such a volatile plane of reality the reader cannot expect him to exercise authorial authority the way the realist writers of the nineteenth century did.

Actually, the word "author," as according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, means a person who creates or gives existence to something, a begetter, father or one who sets forth written statements. Edward W. Said finds an interesting link between the word "author" and the past participle of the Latin verb "augere" which means "an increaser and a founder" (49). Again, "auctoritas" means production, invention or right of possession. It could also mean continuance or causing to continue. All these meanings together point towards the notions of the individual power to initiate, power to supplement, and the authority for continuance of a course. All these could be understood as what an author performs in narrative fiction. A novel "asserts itself psychologically and aesthetically through the technical efforts of the novelist" (Said 49).

In the contemporary age, the best word that Said finds to designate the author’s exercise of writerly authority is "molestation" (49). The apprehension of novel writing as a discursive exercise would reveal the fact that the writer sets his fictional discourse as a parallel to the world of common
discourse. In this parallel process, authority and "molestation" get to be the root of all fictional production. There is begetting, continuity, augmentation, and molestation of reality. But the locus of the author – reader relationship seems to have been seriously undermined in almost all the novels of Roth, just as in most of the fictional texts of his age. In the centre of his novel is the focal character whose voice acts as an opaque mediator between experience and fictional truth. Fiction paradoxically tries to construct truth through falsity and a process of elimination and augmentation.

Generally, the author's name prompts the reader to attribute to him certain discursive practices and determine their category within a society or culture. Foucault, in his essay, "What is an Author?" questions the traditional practices of the reading public to fix the responsibility for the writing on a single person called author (108-109). Foucault's premise is that the author is "only a projection, in more or less psychologizing terms, of the operations that we force texts to undergo, the connections that we make, the traits that we establish as pertinent, the continuities that we recognize, or the exclusions that we practice" (110). The author's biographical details, more often than not, provide the foundation upon which the readers build their propositions about literary texts. But, in Roth's case this kind of a strategy of reading would undoubtedly prove to be self-defeating and detrimental to the pattern in which five of his novels have been examined. All the five texts contain a number of signs like the personal pronouns, and adverbs of time and place
that seemingly refer to the author. Foucault states that these signs are highly misleading and it would be "wrong to equate the author with the real writer as to equate him with the fictitious speaker; the author function is carried out and operates in the scission itself, in this division [disintegration] and this distance" (112). The first person pronoun and the present indicative do not categorically refer either to the writer or to the time in which he writes, but rather to an alter ego whose spatio-temporal distance from the author varies from time to time and text to text. Roth's novels appear, to a certain extent, to be endowed with the "author function." But they possess a plurality of self which the reader has to dislocate and locate in the process of a "deft" reading explained in the second chapter of the thesis. Roth's self that speaks in an interview, a preface and in Reading Myself and Others and in the texts are all apparently different from one another. In an interview or a preface, the "I" refers to an individual who has completed a certain job. In the text, the "I" indicates an individual caught within a web of symbols, signs and axioms. Again within the text itself the "I" could, as a third self, perform the hermeneutic role of explaining the meaning of signs or actions. In these strands of discourse, Roth gets dispersed/disintegrated as many "simultaneous selves" (Foucault 113). As apart from the "author function," what requires further consideration is the way the traditional character has been replaced by what could conveniently be called the subject in the post-Freudian sense of the term. The basic change the reader could find is the shift from the dark
zones of psychology toward the surface. This shift is clearly discernible in the discursive evolution from *Portnoys Complaint* to *The Counterlife*. It is not the mere shift toward surface. In *The Great American Novel*, and *The Counterlife* the traditional concepts of character and form become a means of parodying the conventions themselves. In *Our Gang* and the baseball novel the names chosen seem to have meanings which they do not have or do not develop or about which one cannot judge. They undermine the importance of the names and ultimately of "character" in fiction. The practice appears to bring out the fissure between the meaning the reader assigns and the meaning which may or may not be there. Character becomes fiction in Roth and his novels abound with characters whose names are simultaneously appropriate and incongruous.

The treatment by the author of himself as his own main character has emerged as an unconventional technique in modern experimental novels. This is found to exist very prominently in *The Counterlife* where Nathan Zuckerman is considered as "Zuckerroth" by Alan Cooper (213). The reader is intrigued and delighted by Roth's treatment of his fictional self. At the same time it could be considered outrageous if judged from a different viewpoint. It is in fact like the real Roth manipulating the reader's attitude towards the fictional Roth. This kind of manipulation is most likely to obscure and confuse the significant implications with regard to the bond between
imagination and fact. This is a point where the contemporary writers like Roth face the charge of lying.

In the attempt to define the ontological dimension of literary fiction, philosophers have gathered themselves into two groups. The first group subscribes to the view that fiction is nothing but refined lies. The second group argues that it is irrelevant to talk about the status of "truth" in literary fiction. But from the polemic between these two groups a third opinion also has arisen that fiction presents "alternative worlds." Patricia Waugh believes that there is a clear conflict between description and creation in fiction:

Description of objects in fiction are simultaneously creations of that object (Descriptions of objects in the context of the material world are determined by the existence of the object outside the description). Thus the ontological status of fictional objects is determined by the fact that they exist by virtue of, whilst also forming, the fictional context which is finally the words on the page. (88)

From this view it is clear that a fictional character exists as well as does not exist. He/She is a non-entity but at the same time is somebody. Portnoy, at the end of the novel just lets out a long anguished cry. The character is only a voice, having awareness of its existence only when it articulates. What the conventional reader longs for is the real that supposedly
exists outside language, beyond an author. But the actuality is only of the
author’s voice which is let out through language. Ultimately, language forms
the totality of existence and the text is the only reality one could look forward
to.

In Roth proper names are displayed in their apparent arbitrariness or
absurdity. They are placed in a directly metaphoric/metonymic or adjectival
relationship with the thing they name. This is quite pertinent to all the five
texts. Bernice W. Kliman has written an article itself on the peculiarity of
names in Portnoy’s Complaint. He thinks that the novel operates as a
discourse mainly because of its peculiar proper names. With familiar
historical and casual names the text achieves verisimilitude.

Again, interchangeability of characters also poses a problem to the
reader. In My Life as a Man, The Great American Novel and The Counterlife
interchangeability is either implied or covert. The thoughts and impressions
assigned to the major and minor characters are more of tropisms as they seem
to have a high level of similarity and a low level of individuation among
themselves. Robert S.Ryf maintains that “the narrator, both participant and
observer, merges with his characters on occasion, and the characters
themselves assume, from time to time, each other’s identities, at least in part”
(321). Characters are given reduced importance as characters for their own
sake in order to harness their potential for point of view. They have the
potential to provide various masks for the author. This is significantly exemplified through *My Life as a Man* and *The Counterlife*. Ryf further reinforces the point by drawing out a pertinent analogy between “author-character relationship to” the epistemological function of the imagination” (332).

Of noteworthy significance is the narrator taking up the role of an informant about his own text. Along with this is the shifting perception of the nature of the bond between narrator and characters. In Roth’s novels, the narrator who calls the characters “you” appears to perform the composite role of an observer and participant as well. Characters in Roth’s fiction usually disintegrate, but what keeps them as beings with simulated integrity is their proper names. The names not only identify in the sense of naming the character but they also unify, integrate and individualize the disparate attributes of the character. Docherty suggests that naming strategy in fiction would make possible the existence of the character as a “pre-text” as well as the character’s existence in the ‘context’ of the novel” (223). In realistic fiction, the reader gets referred back in time to an existence cinterior to the text which reveals the significance of the character in the text. But Roth’s *avant garde* novels do not refer the reader to the character’s existence as a “pre text,” on the other hand, they refer him to a “post-text” (Docherty 223). That is to a future construction of relevant subjective experience or history, and not to a conceptually realised past experience.
Be it within the realm of the familial ties or a conflict with the polity, the motivational forces effect disintegration of the whole self in character. In a certain way, the illusory ontological existence of the character is undermined by such a strategy in writing. Characters could be found transcending the boundaries of the fiction or sometimes they even go beyond the integrating notion of the self. In this case the novel gets into history, the history and experience of the reader-subject.

Roth’s characters look for a place of safety and security, a home rather, from where they could meaningfully interpret their world. Over and above this, they need a stasis and rest in the accomplishment of selfhood. Their home could be the static centred self from which frame of view they would be able to make meaning of their universe. The motivation of the character towards a fixed self, a static place or “home” is a difficult thing to consummate. Roth’s narrative discourse does not appear to refer to one named self as such. The language of the texts becomes connotative of a kinetic series of subjects. Character loses its place and static self and becomes, as Docherty would say, “absent to its own speaking presence in the text” (235). Portnoy cries out to Spielvogel to deliver him from a state of emptiness. To Smitty, the sense of aloneness has been “the masoned, walled town of a novelist’s exclusiveness, which admits but small entrance to any sympathy from the green country without” (GAN 42). Again, Nathan states about his search for his true self as “the search for [his] anti-self carrying [his] old identity papers
and disguised as N.Z.” (CL 149). It is through a productive interaction that the reader and the character attain their ontological status within the discourse as desiring kinetic subjects. Smitty and Tarnopol desire a comprehensible epistemological structuration of events that would let them find their place among them in fiction. This appears to be the motivation for them to write narratives. They have to locate themselves in the space between the experiencing character and the narrating character. They all fail to reach a point of consummation and end up merely as a subject but not as a static self. America becomes an important text, for it stages the evolution from the self to the subject. All characters find themselves exiled from their self (home) and arriving in the brave new world of choice that is America which symbolizes “a punishment for a transgression at home” (Docherty 240). Every novel starts at a point where innocence is lost and the character (and reader) is at the entry point of the experience of America. The new typology of characterisation, based on agapeic motivation liberates characters from their status as static selves. It also helps the reader move into the possibility of a subjective experience beyond the self. History could then be constructed through subjective characterisation.

Roth’s texts appear to disavow epiphany and pretend to believe in the worthlessness of external values which imply the peril of reducing the writer’s scope for expression of subjectivity. Well in keeping with the spirit of his age, the reader is able to find a shift of the “mimetic referent from external
‘reality’ to their own mock literary activity” (Greenman 308). His fiction rejects the concepts of spirituality and aesthetics, and what is substituted for them is an engagement with the banal. In the novels, one finds the attempt to situate the reader in their language constructs. Description seems to be shunned to make way for the discursive construct. In Roth, language itself becomes an essential property out of which he makes his construct: “Beginning with Goodbye Columbus, I’ve been attracted to prose that has the turns, vibrations, intonations, and cadences, the spontaneity and ease, of spoken language, at the same time that it is solidly grounded on the page, weighted with the irony, precision, and ambiguity associated with a more traditional literary rhetoric” (RMAO 15). By his unconventional use of language, he brings into effect an epistemological shift that calls into question the mimetic property of language as a window to the world of reality. The texts becomes a site not merely for an intercourse between fiction and reality, but also for a dialectical confrontation between language/syntax and reality. The syntax of reality is made apparent by a syntax of language. Barthes, in “Theory of the Text” defines the text by giving supreme status to its linguistic component:

“The text is a fragment of language, itself placed in a perspective of language. To communicate some knowledge or some theoretical reflection about the text pre-supposes, then that one is oneself in some way or other engaging in textual practice” (35).
There appears to be a total absence of easily decipherable values and of any philosophic or aesthetic depth in the texts. They are more involved in bringing about the recognition of that literature fundamentally is a subjective act. The aesthetic object seems to be a non-entity or peripheral to the text's functioning as a discursive operation. If at all there is a mimetic strand in Roth's texts it would be mimesis of subjective, internalised reality.

Contemporary thinking posits that a text is framed by its own commentary. The interpretation of a literary text depends upon the same level as its object. This is say that the interpretative potential of the text is embodied within itself. There can be no pure literary object that would not contain a code of interpretation. The classic conflict between the text and its external interpretative operation is replaced by what Slavoj Zizek defines as "a continuity of an infinite literary text which is always already its own reading; that is which sets up distance from itself" (153). This point about the possibility of metalanguage in fiction is very relevant in the case of The Counterlife. Perhaps, this is why the contemporary critical procedure emphasizes a search in purely literary texts for statements denoting a theory about their functioning.

Generally speaking, every text is caught in a fundamental ambiguity and flooded with the dissemination of the intertextual process. The appeal of the text is not to the being of man but ultimately to the structures of language.
and the unconsciousness. Literature and humanistic discourses have been trying to "dissolve" man. They have been creating epistemes to provide themselves with a space to individuate man as an object to be known according to a number of different paradigms. Roth too could be said to succeed in creating a matrix of space within which he, through novelistic discursivity, tries to establish the basis on which man is able to present himself to a possible knowledge.