CHAPTER VI
SUMMING UP

To sum up on the achievement of Philip Roth would be contrary to the spirit of this novelist whose oeuvre is marked by "surprisingness," innovation, openness and creativity. The difficulty of such a task is compounded when the study is made through the perspectives of a critic who saw everything in the world as "unfinalizable," who celebrated dialogue characterized by its open-endedness and who despaired over "the ultimate word" on anything. In keeping with the spirit of the theorist Bakhtin and that of the practitioner Roth, the following remarks are presented by way of conclusion.

Roth's early writing, which is predominantly serious and monologic, has made critics by and large impose the same seriousness on his later works. This critical tendency has led to treating several of his later works as the "freakish nonsense" of an otherwise great writer or to attributing intentions of satire and Jewish self-hatred. Such criticism hardly accounts for the playful spirit of what Huizinga designates the homo ludens.\(^1\) This playful spirit has a rich and hoary tradition and is no mere frivolity or the inspired creation of a moment.

A long tradition of the positive and celebratory aspects of the anarchic and playful spirit has been traced by Mikhail Bakhtin in the folk-culture of laughter--chiefly
in carnival celebrations of the Middle Ages and in the Saturnalian festivities of the classic past. This indomitable carnival laughter entered literature during the Renaissance, carnivalizing literature itself. A supreme example of this carnivalization is François Rabelais's *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*. Though the festive, collective laughter of carnival became largely reduced especially since the Enlightenment, when academic literary tradition and the grotesque tradition of the marketplace parted ways, the "generic memory" of carnivalized literature continued to influence and helped shape carnival forms in literature. A high-water mark of this carnivalization is the works of Dostoevsky; Bakhtin points out that Dostoevsky may not have been directly influenced by carnival forms, but that he was simply adopting the traditions of a whole range of carnival genres.

By extending Bakhtin's analogy of Rabelais and Dostoevsky to the mid-career fiction of Philip Roth, the present study reveals the presence of elements of carnival in two of Roth's novels. The first of these two, *Portnoy's Complaint*, has often been interpreted by critics as satire on the one hand, or psychoanalytic confession of self-hatred on the other. A Bakhtinian reading of the images present in the novel shows that they are carnivalesque. The images in *Portnoy's Complaint* are predominantly of the "bodily lower stratum," which in carnival laughter highlights all that is
low, earthly, base. Opposed to the images of man in classical aesthetics which celebrate the head and the finely finished features of the body, the grotesque realism of carnival celebrates the belly, hips, genitals and the openings and orifices of the body. In *Portnoy's Complaint* too, the images are of grotesque realism.

Moreover, carnival celebration involves the "degrading" or "debasing" of all that is high and serious to the level of the bodily lower stratum, but it was not mere negation or satiric rejection. The folk-culture of humour saw birth and death, eating and defecation, top and bottom not as polar opposites, but as each containing the other and trying to become the other. This duality makes all carnival images ambivalent. The images in *Portnoy's Complaint* reveal the dual, ambivalent nature of all the bodily/sexual images that mark the work as carnivalesque.

However, for all its carnivalization, Portnoy's celebration ends in cerebration; and by the end of the novel, carnival laughter becomes "reduced laughter" that Bakhtin finds in post-Renaissance literature. The carnival in *Portnoy's Complaint* is thus a post-lapsarian version in the present era of Freudian psychoanalysis. But there is no gainsaying the fact that a Bakhtinian reading of *Portnoy's Complaint* reveals celebration and does not solicit sympathy. Any attempt to sympathize with Portnoy or read his complaint as serious or to regard his plight as painful is to be
completely blind to its images which are marked by carnival ambivalence.

Roth pulls all the stops out and opens the floodgates of carnival in The Great American Novel. As mentioned before, if classical/traditional aesthetics presents youth, harmony and balance as ideals, carnival-grotesque celebrates bodies that are old, handicapped or abnormal. The Great American Novel is the chronicle of a baseball team comprising old, one-armed, one-legged players, dwarfs, misfits and social outcasts. Theirs is the grotesque body celebrated by carnival. In addition to presenting them in a celebratory tone, Roth depicts normal, perfect players in disgrace, which is also in true carnival spirit. More significantly, the authorities of baseball such as the umpire and the team manager who are the symbols of seriousness and officialdom, are presented in a poor light. It is carnival inversion and decrowning that dominates the entire novel, its characters and most of the action in it. Even Roth's narrator/writer of the novel—an eighty-seven year-old sports-writer confined to a home for the aged, nearly senile and almost mad—belongs to the carnivalesque. It is Bakhtin's optic of carnival that shows the celebratory tone and ambivalent nature of The Great American Novel in bold relief.

From an orgy of images, Philip Roth turns to a subtle play of voices in My Life as a Man. Critics of this
novel have observed that the theme of this novel is the attempt made by its novelist/hero in finding the right narrative voice. Such studies of this novel have merely analysed its style and language as if it is a uniform "monologic" phenomenon. Bakhtin's dialogic sense of language emphasizes that a language is made up of "languages" (linguistic/social registers) and not of neutral words. This means that in the process of using a language, one has to appropriate words from previous usages in other contexts by others (and not from an inert dictionary). In this process, one also has to take into account the interlocutor to whom the words are addressed. All this linguistic activity makes living language double-voiced or dialogic and Bakhtin has discovered the novel to be the supreme embodiment of the living language. Therefore, the novel is a dialogic, double-voiced discourse. Whereas the poet and the dramatist, practitioners of the "high," monologic genres, use direct, unmediated language, trying to suppress the traces of earlier voices in words; the novelist appropriates other people's words and uses indirect, or "quoted" speech. He exploits this dialogism inherent in language. This is done chiefly through hybrid construction, incorporated genres and character zones. In My Life as a Man Roth makes use of all these elements making it a double-voiced discourse.

A dialogic reading of this novel reveals a tension in the chief character Tarnopol. This tension arises
between the (auto)biographer and the novelist in him. He first creates two fictions that deal with his joyful youth and a disastrous marriage respectively. Finding fiction inadequate, he abandons the guise of fiction and turns to autobiography and to "unmediated," "straightforward" language and narration. But Tarnopol's autobiography keeps acquiring the language and quality of fictional narrative. The memoirist (Tarnopol) is unable to overcome the fictionist in him and so is unable to escape the patterns of fiction-making. No matter how much he avows to use the straightforward discourse of the memoirist, he keeps slipping into fictional discourse. The implication of the novel is that no matter what happens, the moment something has happened, we can only create a fiction of it in our memory and in our recall of these events. Just as in living conversation, we cannot rid words of the traces of meaning left by previous users of the word, Tarnopol finds himself unable to escape the language of fictional discourse that he thinks would mar his "factual" report. It is this inability of Tarnopol to "demystify his past and mitigate his uncommendable sense of defeat" that is presented by Roth through a tension, resulting in a double-discourse. My Life as a Man is a supreme example of the novel as double-voiced discourse.

Roth's most recent novel Operation Shylock, a loose, baggy monster, renders itself to a Bakhtinian
analysis through the concept of "polyphony." The novel presents a number of chaotic events happening to real as well as to fictional personages. Rambling and episodic, it is a curious hybrid of fact and fantasy, reality and imagination. It defies laws of causality and eschews a linear plot and thwarts all attempts at comprehending it.

It is in his study of Dostoevsky that Bakhtin defines and elaborates the idea of polyphony. Primarily, the term denotes a special position of the author in the text created by him. Unlike in the homophonic or monologic novel, the author of polyphonic fiction allows extraordinary independence to his characters. They are capable of standing beside the author on the same level as the author, in these texts. By renouncing all "essential authorial surplus" on them, the polyphonic author refuses to "finalize" his characters. Such characters in polyphonic fiction are not mere objects ("it") but become full-fledged subjects (individuals). All this results in a relativizing of the author's position, authority and voice in the text. His becomes one more voice in the polyphony (of his characters' voices).

By allowing an extraordinary independence to his characters, Roth reduces his own voice to just one more voice in the text. As a consequence, characters in Operation Shylock become full-fledged subjects capable of standing alongside the author, arguing with him and entering into a
dialogue with him. Further, Roth has combined polyphonic design with a plot-structure of the adventure/picaresque novel for the purpose of posing philosophical questions and raising important issues. In this process of polyphony and adventure-plot, Roth is able to attack established notions like Jewish suffering and cherished ideals like Zionism. Through polyphony, Roth points out the narrow, one-sided nature of all official discourse and authoritarian ideas. In all these respects, Operation Shylock proves to be a polyphonic novel par excellence on the lines of Dostoevsky's fiction. A Bakhtinian study of this novel reveals Roth's design and skill underneath a seeming "fluid pudding."

When the analysis of his individual novels is placed in a wider perspective we see that this Bakhtinian approach reveals aspects of Roth's fiction which do not yield themselves to other approaches. A Bakhtinian study attests to the remarkable range of his techniques in presenting his artistic vision. Such a study reveals the indomitable comic/anarchic spirit in Roth that is ever at war with serious/authoritarian tendencies in the society at large as well as within him. The present study also emphasizes the need to desist from imposing a uniform monologic pattern on his fiction. All these aspects of Roth's fiction are brought to sharp relief by a Bakhtinian approach.
Further, this study acquits Roth of the charge that his novels are marred by a cloying obsession with his own self and a morbid preoccupation with matters of sex and bodily functions. As Linda Matchan has summarized these charges: "He has been described as a self-hating Jewish pornographer. A malicious destroyer of women. An obsessive anti-Semite whose greatest obsession is himself" (237). Another charge against Roth is that his attitudes are glib and his stances flippant, resulting in "facile affirmations" of his vision and world-view. The carnivalesque approach to Portnoy's Complaint and a polyphonic reading of Operation Shylock shows that the presentation of the self may be Roth's favourite subject but it is neither cloying nor morbid. The carnival ambivalence of the images and the genuine polyphony of voices in these works disprove charges of obsession often levelled by critics.

Bakhtin's grotesque realism, with its emphasis on the bodily lower stratum, brings out the long and celebrated tradition of carnival which opposes high, monologic, authoritarian culture by means of all that is low. This bringing down is a carnival inversion and uncrowning. It is not a mere negative expose or prurient exhibitionism, as made out by detractors of Roth. The play of voices and the resulting double-voiced discourse in My Life as a Man proves beyond doubt Roth's manifesto that reality is stranger than fiction and that the novelist is no match to media report. Roth's vision is a well-earned affirmation indeed. A
Bakhtinian approach, besides discovering elements of his fiction and techniques of presentation hitherto undiscovered, acquits Roth of the charges levelled by his detractors.

It is to be mentioned here that Philip Roth could not have had access to Bakhtin's ideas or modelled his works on Bakhtin's typology. Some of Roth's works precede the publication of Bakhtin's theories in the west. Moreover, in his interviews and articles Roth openly acknowledges and frequently mentions literary influences on his writing. If the latter had wielded any influence on the former, Roth would certainly have mentioned it. It therefore speaks of the richness of Roth's fiction that they render themselves to a critical analysis based on Bakhtin's ideas. Likewise, the universality of Bakhtin's theories (which he had evolved out of the Renaissance French writer Rabelais and the nineteenth century Russian novelist Dostoevsky) and their validity is borne out by the fact that they have been used in this study to mine the rich vein of Roth's works, which belong to Jewish-American, late 20th century fiction. The theorist and the practitioner of fiction are separated by divergent cultures and religions, historical periods and geographical distances. Philip Roth and Mikhail Bakhtin, however, come together, understand each other and enter into dialogue. Such is the richness of Roth's fiction as well as the vision behind Bakhtin's theory.
This Bakhtinian study of Roth's fiction is by no means exhaustive and to look briefly at further prospects of Roth research would be in order. Between the novels discussed in the present study (1969-1993), Roth has authored nine book-length works besides some minor writings. Following *My Life as a Man*, Roth published *The Professor of Desire* (1977), which records the boyhood reminiscences, adolescent adventures and marital mishaps of David Kepesh. To readers of Roth, David Kepesh is a familiar figure from *The Breast* (1972), a Professor of Comparative Literature who found himself transformed one night into a gigantic female breast. *The Professor of Desire* presents Kepesh before he turned into a breast in *The Breast*. There is probably no other instance of a work where a sequel written some five years after an earlier work actually becomes a "prequel." In any case, it is certain to be rare.

A Bakhtinian approach to temporal aspects of the "prequel" and the sequel ought to be critically rewarding. Such a study could be made by applying Bakhtin's concept of the "chronotope." Bakhtin defines chronotope "as the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 84). In other words, chronotopes are methods of artistically fixing time and space from historical space and time. Bakhtin has traced the evolution of different chronotopes and how they have formed and shaped novel-genres throughout their history. A chronotopic
study is bound to reveal the artistic significance of the reversal of time sequence in The Breast and The Professor of Desire.4

In addition to a chronotopic approach, Roth's Zuckerman novels (collected together and published as Zuckerman Bound [1985]),5 could be studied to discover dialogic relationships that obtain between the individual Zuckerman novels. A singular and noteworthy feature of these novels is Roth's unique use of recurring characters.6 His recurring characters are neither picaresque as in detective/espionage serials like Sherlock Holmes or James Bond; nor are they continuing characters as in trilogies, sagas and the roman fleuve. Instead, Roth uses the recurring character of Zuckerman to examine the different facets of the self. The fame and the insult, the comedy and the pain, that result from a literary calling are explored in Zuckerman Bound through Roth's fictional alter-ego, Zuckerman. Bakhtin's ideas of dialogic relationships within an utterance can be extended and applied to study such relationships between the utterances of character(s) in such "conjoined" fictions.

Roth abandons traditional realism but is unable to "let go" of his Zuckermania. This tension has resulted in Roth's publication of The Counterlife (1986) in which Roth seems inspired by the muse of metafiction. By presenting two versions each of two Zuckermans, Roth depicts a
plurality of selves of postmodern aesthetics and departs from the fractured self of the modernist aesthetics depicted in *Zuckerman Bound*. Characters in this fiction are not contained by the boundaries of birth-life-death. In the words of Shostak: "Roth thematizes structure in the novel, shattering narrative conventions, deconstructing the unitary self by multiplying stories about the self, and opening the fiction out to contemplate its own making" (197). Sometimes, characters in the novel threaten to leave the book. Bakhtin's critical concepts can be sounded against this text both for yielding insights into it and also to "interrogate" the adequacy and validity of Bakhtin's concepts against writings that eschew mimetic realism.

*Deception* (1990), is a text consisting solely of snatches of conversation devoid of any attribution and without any diegetic passages of narration/exposition/stage-direction. The entire novel reads like a transcript of audio-taped dialogues between two persons. This dialogue takes place between disembodied voices. This text too can be studied to "interrogate" Bakhtin who always associated voices and ideas with the person carrying them, and who was ever opposed to Hegelian dialectic which, for him, erased dialogue. Dialectic, to Bakhtin, was dialogue minus voices.

*The Facts* (1988) and *Patrimony* (1991), Roth's nonfictional, (auto)biographical memoirs do exhibit qualities of fiction. As one reviewer puts it: "Roth is
worth reading not for what happened to him but for what he made of it" (Gray n.p.). The relationship between fact and fiction, report and narration in these works can be studied through the dialogic relationship that exists between them.

Bakhtin's dialogic/carnivalistic/polyphonic concepts of the novel can be applied to the other "monologic" genres of drama and poetry. In fact, it has been done in the ground-breaking dialogic readings of Professor Don Bialotosky's study of Wordsworth's poetry. The lyric, which presents an unmediated, straightforward word of a single consciousness/persona has been proved by Bialotosky to be amenable to Bakhtinian readings, very much against Bakhtin's own insistence of the exclusiveness of his theories for the study of novel form.

The astounding variety of Philip Roth's oeuvre spanning four decades ought to prepare us for the surprises that he would spring in future. But if Roth's practice of fiction is any indication, he is sure to confound such guesswork. Likewise, the enigma of Mikhail Bakhtin is unresolved. Some twenty years now after his death, the question of "the Bakhtin circle" remains unsolved even as discoveries of Bakhtin's lost manuscripts keep the boom in the "Bakhtin industry" still going. The "surprisingness" of Roth and the "unfinalizability" of Bakhtin may perhaps be described in Bakhtin's own words:
Nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future (Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics 166).
NOTES

1 Huizinga, like Bakhtin, has emphasised the "playful" side which is ever opposed to the "serious" side in man.

2 Of course this does not mean that a Bakhtinian analysis preempts other possible critical approaches to Roth. Such a stance would be against the very spirit of Bakhtin who always valued genuine open-endedness and who believed in "dialogue" that always resists closure. Moreover, to say that aspects of Roth's fiction are brought out only by a Bakhtinian approach would be to deny other valuable features in his works. Bakhtin's life-long emphasis on "unfinalizablility" can be applied not only to creative writing but extended to critical enterprise as well. For instance, aspects of time in Roth's "conjoined" fictions can be studied under Gerard Genette's category of order, frequency and duration. Or a deconstructive approach can be made to study a novel like The Counterlife to explore how it undermines the tenets and assumptions of traditional, mimetic realism in fiction.

3 Recent interest in Narratology has made the representation of time in narrative a subject for study. eg. Gerard Genette's rigorous analysis in Narrative Discourse of various aspects of time in Proust's Remembrance of Things Past. It speaks of Bakhtin's range of vision that he has addressed elaborately this question some four decades before Genette, Chatman and other "grammarians" of narrative.

4 In this context, it is interesting to note François Rigolot's comment on the reversal of chronology in Gargantua and Pantagruel: "...contrary to established modes of authority, of which narrative chronology is one of the most tangible symbols, the book of the son (Pantagruel) precedes the book of the father (Gargantua): this reversal questions the mimetic illusion of epic continuity and the teleological coherence of Rabelais's narrative" (226).
