The Great American Novel and *My Life as a Man:* An Assessment of Philip Roth's Achievement

DAVID MONAGHAN, *Mount Saint Vincent University*

Like their predecessors, *The Great American Novel* and *My Life as a Man* are flawed works, but contain enough of undoubted literary merit to reconfirm that Philip Roth is a writer who deserves our attention. However, critics continue to equivocate about the precise nature of Roth's achievement. There seem to be two main reasons for this equivocation. First of all, instead of dealing with his novels according to their merits, critics have allowed themselves to be distracted by side issues. For example, criticism of *Goodbye Columbus, Letting Go,* and *Portnoy's Complaint* has tended to be over-preoccupied with Jewish cultural issues to the exclusion of discussion of the novels as literature. Mordecai H. Levine's "Philip Roth and American Judaism"[1] typifies this approach to Roth. For Levine, *Letting Go* succeeds because Gabe Wallach recovers his Jewishness, and *Portnoy's Complaint* fails because it creates negative feelings about the Jewish family and Judaism.

Roth's real achievements (and failures) have been similarly obscured by a group of critics who operate on the premise that, to achieve artistic success, a writer must be "committed." Stanley Cooperman's "Old Jacob's Eye? With a Squint"[2] is a rather subtle example of this type of criticism. Cooperman offers many perceptive insights into Roth's novels, but his total argument is seriously weakened by his insistence that Roth fails as an artist simply because he finds the moral values of his society too empty to treat as anything but mannerism and because he regards the formal tradition as eccentric.

Roth criticism has also suffered from a tendency to force his novels into rigid categories. To approach *Goodbye Columbus* as Jewish, *Letting Go,* and *When She Was Good* as naturalism, *Portnoy's Complaint* as pornography, *Our Gang* as political satire, *The Breast* as Kafkaesque allegory, *The Great American Novel* as sports fiction, and *My Life as a Man* as confession, serves only to fragment the canon of Roth's work and to obscure any unifying thematic and stylistic concerns it might possess. The task of Roth criticism must be to ascertain whether there are any logical principles behind his repeated experimentation and whether any consistent vision lies beneath his chameleon surface.

It would be impossible within the scope of this paper to carry out that task fully. However, if we are to grasp what Roth accomplishes in *The Great American Novel* and *My Life as a Man* we must make at least a preliminary survey of the territory. Varied as are the problems with which Roth's novels deal, there seems to be one main thread which runs through all of them, namely, the theme of failure of commitment. This basic concern is established through the characterizations of Neil Klugman in *Goodbye Columbus* and Gabe Wallach in *Letting Go,* both of whom are essentially good men who suffer from an inability to attach themselves to anything of value. Neil skirts around the fringe of middle-class Jewish society, refusing either to embrace or to reject it, until that society finally reclaims Brenda, leaving him isolated. Similarly, Gabe fluctuates uneasily between his teaching job, his father, and a succession of women, until he, too, is left with nothing and no one. Probably the single decent person in a world of egotists, Gabe ends up the biggest failure because the others are all sufficiently self-interested to cling onto something: John Spligliano to academic success; Paul to Libby; Libby to her baby; Martha to

respectable marriage; and Gabe's father to Cecilia Norton. Alexander Portnoy is cast in the same mold. As Assistant Commissioner of Human Opportunity he is involved in a professional world with others, but is uncommitted in personal relationships and continually falls back on his private world of masturbation.

Once we pay attention to this theme of lack of commitment, both *Our Gang* and *The Breast* which, at first sight, seem to represent breathing spaces between novels, can be accommodated into the mainstream of Roth's work. Roth presents Nixon, in the guise of Trick E. Dixon, as essentially a Roth hero, or more precisely, the mirror image of one. Whereas the others fail to commit themselves to good ends, Dixon is unable to commit himself to evil, and can only shuttle indecisively between his various advisors.[3] David Kepesh in *The Breast* is a grotesque exaggeration and simplification of Roth's earlier heroes. Like them he shies away from emotional involvement and feels happy only when he has a girl friend who is "even-tempered and predictable," and who offers "warmth and security," "without the accompanying burden of dependence,"[4] However, whereas neither Neil, Gabe, nor Alex cherishes his isolation, Kepesh pursues aloneness single-mindedly, and it is appropriate that he eventually evolves into a gigantic Breast, the form most suited to his life style. As a Breast he can experience pleasure (he is intensely stimulated by manipulation of his nipple) but is almost completely cut off from others (he has no eyes or limbs and can barely speak).

This concern with lack of commitment is also central to *The Great American Novel* in which Roth presents a collective vision of the uncommitted hero in the shape of the Ruppert Mundy's baseball team. The archetypal Mundys are Ulysses S. Fairsmith and Luke Gofannon, both of whom are well-intentioned but emotionally stunted men. Fairsmith is distracted from the affairs of the real world by his determination to find divine providence at work behind all events, and Gofannon by his total involvement in baseball. Gofannon's human resources are so limited that he brings Angela Whittling Trust to despair by admitting that he loves a triple hit more than her (p. 253).

Once men such as these are called upon to deal with the crude reality of those who wish to exploit baseball for a profit, their failure is inevitable. Gofannon is soon traded away and Fairsmith allows himself to be used as a figurehead. When the Mundys are threatened with the loss of their stadium, Fairsmith again fails to act, so convinced is he that the Lord has chosen his team to suffer trial and tribulation in preparation for a return to their former greatness.

Given that failure of commitment is responsible for its downfall, it is appropriate that the final Mundy team of 1942 and 1943 should be composed of men isolated from the world around them by their individual emotional and physical limitations and by the collective malaise of being the only homeless team in baseball. Typical Mundys are Nickname Damur, a fourteen year old boy who craves a nickname because he believes it will win him acceptance, and Hot Ptah, who is driven into embittered isolation by the loss of a leg.

As in Roth's earlier novels, so in *The Great American Novel* the failure of commitment seems to be irreversible. The Ruppert Mundys are eventually dissolved and all record of them obliterated, permitting the forces of free enterprise, which are turning American society into a place of injustice, prejudice, hypocrisy, and greed, to expand unchallenged.

The protagonist of *My Life as a Man,* Peter Tarnopol, and his fictional creation, Nathan Zuckerman, the major character in Tarnopol's "Useful Fictions," "Salad

Days," and "Courting Disaster," seem at first sight to be very different from Roth's earlier heroes. Both quite deliberately become involved with women, Maureen and Susan in Tarnopol's case and Lydia in Zuckerman's, who "had suffered" and were "so brave" (p. 70) and who thus seem likely to supply the *"moral content"* (p. 80) without which, as they have learnt from their study of literature, life is pointless. However, as each eventually realizes, even though the suffering which results from it is real enough, the commitment which they have sought is false because literary standards cannot be applied to real life. Whereas the world of literature is composed of lofty ideals and moral concerns, the real world is devoid of any serious purpose: "Of course what I also wanted was that my intractable existence should take place at an appropriately lofty moral altitude, an elevation somewhere, say, between *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Wings of the Dove.* But then not even the golden can expect to have everything: instead of the intractability of serious fiction, I got the intractability of soap opera" (pp. 194-195). With this statement, Roth in many ways reaches the nadir of pessimism. Bleak as his earlier novels are, there is never any suggestion that the heroes' failure of commitment results finally from anything other than personal weakness. Now, Roth is asserting that there is nothing in the real world to which one can attach oneself. Oddly enough, however, *My Life as a Man* ends on a more assertive note than any of Roth's other novels. Having been made aware that reality is without value, and having been broken in the process of acquiring this knowledge, Peter Tarnopol proceeds to rebuild his life around literature, the one thing that retains its worth: "Literature got me into this and literature is gonna have to get me out. My writing is all I've got now" (p. 194). Although the novel concludes with Tarnopol still in retreat from the world, he is writing again and it seems likely that he will at last fulfill his ambition "to get to be what is described in the literature as *a man*" (p. 299).

Just as Roth's novels possess thematic unity, so a consistent principle underlies his technical experimentation. Essentially, Roth has been trying throughout his literary career to find an appropriate American mode. His early works draw on literary traditions, particularly the Jewish and the naturalistic, but more recently he has begun to seek for the authentic American voice in pulp fiction, newspapers, psychiatric jargon, and political speeches. *Portnoy's Complaint,* for example, owes much to the language of psychiatry and to pornography and *Our Gang* to political rhetoric. This tendency becomes particularly evident in *The Great American Novel* in which Roth embraces a broad range of popular American speech, drawn mainly from sports, politics, and television. The language of *My Life as a Man* is less pervasively pop than that of *The Great American Novel* since neither Tarnopol nor Zuckerman, the two central consciousnesses, possess a kitsch mentality like that of Word Smith, the narrator of the earlier novel. Nevertheless, in developing the thesis that reality is a soap opera, *My Life as a Man* repeatedly exposes us to the pop sensibility at work. This is most evident in "Salad Days," a brilliant exposé of *kitschmensch* as he manifests himself in the various members of the Zuckerman family.

The reasons for Roth's excursion into pop are made explicit in *The Great American Novel:* "Only *listen,* Nathaniel [Hawthorne], and Americans will write the Great American Novel for you" (p. 37). The fictionalized Hemingway's assertion that the Great American Novel will be written by 'some dago barber sucking on Tums in the basement of the Palmer House" (p. 26), makes the same point.

To assess the achievement of Roth's two most recent novels, it is most profitable to approach them through their popular elements. *The Great American Novel* is the more ambitious of the two in this respect because it limits its frame of reference

entirely to that of popular culture. The problems involved in making a successful statement through such limited resources are immense and there are few successful precedents in English (two which spring to mind are Lennon and McCartney's "When I'm 64," which employs irony and point of view to turn cliché into art, and Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus," which limits its frame of reference to the nursery rhyme, the striptease show, and popular mythology about the Nazis, and draws much of its language from clichés). On the whole *The Great American Novel* does not manage to make art out of popular materials. However, it has many virtues and it might be as well to begin by pointing out areas in which it succeeds.

In *The Great American Novel,* Roth is not content to simply imitate the formal looseness of the popular work, but rather he tries to take full advantage of the freedom thus conferred upon him. In *Portnoy's Complaint, Our Gang,* and *The Breast* Roth's bizarre and occasionally surrealistic humor is limited to a single, central subject—masturbation in *Portnoy's Complaint,* President Nixon in *Our Gang* and man as breast in *The Breast.* However, in *The Great American Novel,* Roth's imagination is allowed total liberty, and he introduces a multitude of bizarre and diverse incidents ranging from a visit to a brothel which specializes in treating its clients as babies to a baseball game featuring a clash between a forty inch tall batter and a thirty-seven inch tall pitcher. The results are often funny, if almost always on the edge of bad taste. Roth's account of the career of Base Baal, the great spitball pitcher, is typical. Throughout the incident, Roth comes close to disgusting rather than entertaining, particularly in his account of Baal's tendency to deposit mucus, or "stringy stuff" (p. 106) on the ball. However, Roth's scatological humor generally works well especially during the episode in which Baal makes his final gesture of revolt at the banning of the spit ball: "And so . . . the once great pitcher . . . did the unthinkable, the unpardonable, the inexpiable: he dropped the flannel trousers of his uniform to his knees, and proceeded to urinate on the ball" (p. 108).

Perhaps the single most imaginatively wild scene in the novel is the one involving the game between the Mundys and an asylum team. Roth's most obvious targets are the inmates who include a pitcher who refuses to throw because the umpire is staring at him. However, the real success of the episode derives from the behavior of the Mundys who, by taking the game seriously, prove themselves to be more insane than the lunatics. The prospect of a rare victory so distorts their perspective that when, for example, one-legged Hot Ptah is able to steal home from second, rather than admit that the fielder was simply too insane to return the ball, they convince themselves that he was "so darned stunned by it all, that finally by the time he figures out what hit him, we has got ourselves a gift of a run" (p. 183).

Roth's humor succeeds here because he not only invites us to laugh at the self-deceiving Mundys, but he also calls upon us to sympathize with their pathetic desire to win. This is particularly evident during the incident in which the coach and Deacon, the pitcher, confer about the latter's chances of maintaining a shutout in the face of a distracting base runner. We are amused by their appallingly sentimental baseball rhetoric and by their failure to realize that, rather than constituting a genuine threat, the runner is paralyzed by personal obsessions. At the same time, however, we are moved by their desire to relive past glories and by the genuine courage of the aging pitcher.

The formal looseness of *The Great American Novel* also allows Roth to fully exercise his parodic skills, which first emerged in *Our Gang.* It is, of course, with parody that Roth attempts to make art out of pop materials. By subtly exaggerating the absurdities and clichés of sports language, politics, and journalism, Roth at once stays within the bounds of pop and yet distances himself from it sufficiently to make a comment about the ability of the debased American language to effect a radical

separation between situation and response. In the incident discussed above the Mundys are able to maintain the illusion that they are involved in a genuine contest only because they have the empty rhetoric of baseball to fall back upon. Cholly, for example, employs chiché to conceal reality by commenting, "Guess he wanted to stay in" (p. 172) as an uncooperative pitcher is removed in a strait jacket. A similar distortion of reality is achieved by Deacon's description of right fielder Parusha's feat of throwing out successive batters at first as "an exhibition such as I have not seen in all my years in organized ball" (p. 182). He is, of course, ignoring the fact that neither batter had attempted to leave the plate.

Political rhetoric comes to the fore as a justification for depriving the Mundys of their home park ("to help save the world for democracy," p. 49) and during the Red Scare which climaxes the novel. Although there is no solid evidence that Communists have infiltrated the Patriot League, nevertheless, a wholesale purge takes simply because the American people suspend all judgment when faced with familiar rhetoric: "General, you talk to me of *stigmas,* but there is no stigma—there is only subversion! There is only conspiracy and sabotage!" (p. 323).

In that *The Great American Novel* is supposedly written by Word Smith, a journalist, Roth's satire on journalistic language necessarily pervades the whole novel. The first chapter, indeed, is devoted to an exegesis on Smith's style, which is built mainly around alliteration, antithesis, and lists. However, this part of Roth's satire is rather confusing because, although he is caught up almost entirely in the world of cliché, Smith is also the only character in the novel capable of understanding the truth about American life. No one else realizes that baseball operates according to the profit motive, that the Mundys were exiled for economic rather than Patriotic reasons, and that the Red Scare is a fake. Word Smith, then, would seem to contradict Roth's basic statement about the tendency of cliché to hide the truth. The contradiction seems unresolvable, and we can only presume that Roth failed to solve the problem of establishing a point of view that works through clichés yet transcends them.

The major faults of *The Great American Novel,* however, do not derive from its narrative technique, but from a general tendency towards superficiality and irrelevancy. These qualities, of course, must necessarily be present on the surface of any work written within pop conventions. Nevertheless, it is the job of the pop artist to somehow transcend the surface appearance. This, Roth, unfortunately, does not succeed in doing, or at least he does not succeed sufficiently to prevent us making unfavorable comparisons with his earlier realistic fiction. The strength of a novel like *Letting Go* lies in its presentation of character and environment, and these are replaced in *The Great American Novel* by a series of comic-strip types acting out their fates against a vividly-colored, but one-dimensional backdrop. Roth's intention is to overwhelm us with novelty and variety, and for a while this works. However, we finally begin to long for some level of complexity, for a character made up of more than a few eccentric gestures.

Roth's themes are similarly slight. The main theme, from which all the others stem, is that of innocence corrupted by materialism, and this is worked out at both the local and the archetypal levels. Roth's use of archetypes is often very witty because he is not so much seeking to ground American experience in something more universal as mocking the mythologizing tendencies of modern fiction. Thus, he introduces such crudely mythological figures as Gil Gamesh, the apparently invincible pitcher who is defeated by his mortality; Luke Gofannon, who dies by water; and John Baal, the evil force in the Mundys' team. Moreover, and this Roth would say is inevitable in any American novel, baseball is compared to the Garden of Eden. The local satire,

however, lacks impact because it is often outmoded. For example, the admission of midgets into the league, a purely economic move wrapped up in rhetoric about the equality of man, is clearly intended as a comment on the admission of Negroes into baseball in the 1940's, and the Red Scare episode is directed against McCarthyism.

Besides being outmoded some of Roth's parallels are gratuitous. Thus, he constructs a series of pointless analogies between the assassination of Roland Agni and that of John Kennedy, under the general heading of "The Shot Heard Round the League" (p. 356). Similarly, in the midst of Bob Yamm's letter announcing his retirement from baseball, Roth introduces an amusing but irrelevant reference to Nixon's Checkers speech: "just about the only one I seem *not* to have failed is my chihuahua pup, Pinch-hit, who has sat in my lap all the while I have been composing this letter" (p. 204). Perhaps most irrelevant of all is Roth's account of General Fairsmith's attempt to convert African natives to baseball, which is organized around a series of references to Melville's *Omoo* and *Typee* and Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* (pp. 304, 305).

The weakness of *The Great American Novel* perhaps taught Roth that it is impossible to construct a novel-length work entirely upon pop conventions, and in *My Life as a Man* he avoids such extremes of experimentation. By filtering his narrative through a non-pop mentality, Roth is able to record the workings of an essentially pop society, but he is also able to draw back from it. He can thus more easily achieve his aim of being both inside and outside of popular culture. This change of technique also means, of course, that *My Life as a Man* lacks some of the strengths of *The Great American Novel* in that its satire is neither so pervasive nor so freewheeling. However, this novel's faults do not derive from Roth's inability to handle pop materials, but from the overcomplexity of his point of view.

As with all of Roth's more recent fiction, the greatest strength of *My Life as a Man* derives from its satirical presentation of the stereotypes by which people live. The first story, "Salad Days," is an account of an existence conducted according to clichés. Mr. Zuckerman believes in life as a struggle and in Dale Carnegie; Mrs. Zuckerman is the all-suffering, all-loving, ever-cheerful mother. Their marriage is idyllic. Sherman, the elder son, follows a conventional path, beginning with an initiation into life and sex provided by the army, progressing through a brief period of nonconformity during which he becomes a jazz pianist, and concluding with marriage and a career in dentistry. His younger brother, Nathan, is led into revolt by, inevitably, Hemingway's *Of Time and the River,* and goes to a small college where he experiences a standard intellectual liberation. Nathan's sex life with Sharon Shatsky is based on pornographic clichés.

Roth's eye for physical detail and keen ear for speech patterns give flesh to his record of stereotyped life patterns. The dean of the college, who possesses a "briar pipe and football shoulders swathed in tweed" (p. 12), tells the freshman that "the ivy on the library walls . . . could be heard on certain moonlit nights to whisper the word 'tradition' " (p. 11). And Mrs. Zuckerman, who turns up at Nathan's school "dressed in the clothes she ordinarily wore only when she and her 'girl friends' went in to Philadelphia to see the matinee performance of a stage show" (p. 7), later asks her college-age son "why did Daddy ever buy the house, if not for you to have a real boy's room, a room of your own for you and all your things?" (p. 6).

While not as broad in its range as the satire in *The Great American Novel,* the satire in *My Life as a Man* encompasses a greater social scope. Whereas the earlier novel limits itself entirely to the culture of the masses, the latter gives considerable attention to avant garde kitsch. Maureen Tarnopol, with her pretensions to sensitivity ("I have my flute . . . I have Group. I'm going to the New School," p. 275) is the main

subject of this aspect of Roth's satire. Roth is particularly successful in delineating Maureen's therapy group which is presented to us through tantalizing, fragmentary secondhand reports, most of which are accompanied by Peter Tarnopol's caustic comments. Maureen's pseudointellectual friends are debunked in similar indirect fashion (pp. 183-84).

Roth's satire in *My Life as a Man* finally has greater impact than that in *The Great American Novel* because it supports a more subtle theme. Whereas its predecessor contented itself with a rather superficial view of the debasement of American ideals, *My Life as a Man* deals rather intricately with the differences between art and life. Roth's satire is not intended simply to mock American mores, but to reveal the tragicomic gap between the life of moral seriousness and dignity presented by literature and the crude farce of reality. The point of "Salad Days" is not that the Zuckerman's are funny, but that, by living out stereotypes, they are ultimately successful. Mr. Zuckerman's life of toil is rewarded at last with "a brand new 'Mr. Z.' shoe store . . . at the two-million-dollar Country Club Hills Shopping Mall" (p. 6). Sherman prospers as a dentist married to "some skinny Jewish girl from Bala-Cynwyd" (p. 11), as does Sonia with her "summer house in the Italian Catskills [which] had even more pink 'harem' pillows in the living room than the one in Scotch Plains, and an even grander pepper mill" (pp. 38-39). So long as he accepts clichés Nathan also progresses successfully, academically and sexually. However, once he tries to live by literary standards he inevitably fails.

Peter Tarnopol recognizes that it is precisely this gap between ideal and reality which has reduced his life to a state of chaos. In deciding to marry Maureen, he was making one of "those moral decisions that I had heard so much about in college literature courses" (p. 193). The life which results from this serious decision proves to be "a soap opera" (pp. 195, 304). Tarnopol equates his marriage with that of "Blondie and Dagwood, or Maggie and Jiggs" (p. 270) and describes himself as "the Dagwood Bumstead of fear and trembling" (p. 210). What he finally learns is that *"You want subtlety, read* The Golden Bowl, *This is life, bozo, not high art"* (p. 309).

My Life as a Man is flawed, not by any weakness in its use of popular conventions, but because, in trying to suggest the complexity of "knowing" a person, Roth presents Tarnopol from so many perspectives that, in the end, we find we know nothing at all about him. In addition to Tarnopol's exhaustive self-interpretation, we are offered a psychiatric analysis (which is entirely at odds with Tarnopol's evaluation of himself), and two pieces of fiction, written by Tarnopol for therapeutic reasons, which are accompanied by three interpretations (two by characters we know little about, and one by Dr. Spielvogel, the psychiatrist). The reader is left wondering whether Tarnopol is a realiable narrator or, as he even suggests himself, whether he is too much in the grip of his obsessions to see things clearly. If we reject Tarnopol's point of view, should we then approach him through Dr. Spielvogel's analysis or through the "Useful Fictions"? If the latter, should we rely on one of the conflicting interpretations of them presented in the novel, or on our own interpretation? Ultimately, the novel gives us no fixed points of reference and we are left shuffling uneasily between shifting narrative perspectives.

Besides making the novel confusing, Roth's multiple points of view also serve to make it frequently static and boring. Tarnopol's attempts at understanding himself become tedious, and the long exchanges between patient and doctor, neither of whose judgments we can be certain about, finally reduce themselves to a tight circle of hypotheses about personality which give us litle guidance or entertainment. The exchange between Spielvogel and Tarnopol about the ethics of Spielvogel using Tarnopol as an example in his article entitled "Creativity: The Narcissism of the Artist" is particularly dull. Well before the end of such episodes we begin to long to

see the characters in action in order that we might judge them by what they do and by what they say in their everyday, less self-conscious conversations. *My Life as a Man* serves very much to underline the truth of Lionel Trilling's comment that "the great novelists knew that manners indicate the largest intentions of men's souls as well as the smallest."[5]

Roth's fiction can be viewed as a unified body and we should regard each novel as a serious attempt to express his vision of the failure of commitment. However, as an examination of *The Great American Novel* and *My Life as a Man* reveals, Roth has not yet been entirely successful in finding an appropriate form through which to filter this vision. Whether he will continue to experiment with popular conventions, or whether he will move in yet another direction, remains to be seen.

NOTES

[1]*C[ollege]. L[language]. A[Association] Journal,* 14 (Dec., 1970), 163-170.

[2]*Twentieth Century Literature,* 19 (1973), 203-216.

[3]Philip Roth, *Our Gang* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), particularly, Chapter 3, "Tricky Has Another Crisis."

[4]Philip Roth, *The Breast* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), p. 8. Subsequent references to Roth's novels will be cited in the text, and will be taken from the Holt, Rinehart and Winston editions of the novels. *The Great American Novel* was published in 1973 and *My Life as a Man* in 1974.

[5]Lionel Trilling, "Manners, Morals and the Novel," in *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: Viking, 1950), pp. 211-212.