ROTH AND WAR: TWO CASES

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BRIAN VAN REET

Dr. Speer Morgan, Thesis Advisor

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

ROTH AND WAR: TWO CASES

presented by Brian Van Reet,
a candidate for the degree of master of arts,
and hereby certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

___________________________________________________
Professor Speer Morgan

___________________________________________________
Professor Samuel Cohen

___________________________________________________
Professor Steve Weinberg
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INTRODUCTION

The Arc of a Career

“There’s a strong warlike component to your Fate line. Your Fate line sort of rises in the Mount of Mars. You actually have three Fate lines. Which is very unusual. Most people don’t have any.”
- Jinx reading Roth’s palm in *Operation Shylock*

War is one of Philip Roth’s recurrent themes, its martial drumbeat marking time throughout a career that varies greatly in style and subject matter. At his best, Roth represents the most complex problems of the 20th century in terms that are smaller and more knowable than the global forces one reads about in history textbooks. Take for example his depiction of 1930’s Newark, where he spent his childhood, a place and time evoked again and again in his work. Writing about this familiar setting allows Roth to explore mass migration, World War Two, the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, the Great Depression—some of the hardest to represent and most important events of the twentieth century.

Roth has also had his flops writing about war. *The Great American Novel* (1973) is a savage farce set in a fantastic, World War II-era America. Word. E. Smith, the appropriately named narrator, demonstrates his penchant for overalliteration as he tells the mean-spirited tale of a homeless baseball team that competes in the Patriot League during the war, when all the able-bodied pros are serving overseas. Falling roughly at the chronological mid-point of Roth's career,
"Great American Novel" marks what is arguably the qualitative low. Thankfully, the highs are much higher. This sort of variability is what one might expect from such a prolific writer, producer on average of more than a book every two years per half-century. Along the way he has managed to win most every literary prize short of the Nobel and has the distinction of being the only living writer whose collected work is bound in Library of America editions.

Before narrowing the focus to two representative works, I will introduce Roth in general terms. Imagine the arc of his career plotted on two axes: the x, time; the y, literary distinction. Some writers might begin somewhere close to zero on the vertical scale, steadily building their reputation with a succession of improving works. Others might start high with a great first novel and then peter out to obscurity. And still others (Harper Lee, Salinger) can only be represented by one or a few points. In Roth’s case there are many more to plot, twenty-nine books in print with two more in the presses.

Roth has been a constant self-reinventor (also a theme of his work), alternatively writing Jamesian realism, novels completely in dialog, the psychoanalytic rant as novel, the metafictional confession as novel, etc. He produced his most conceptually far-out work in the late sixties and early seventies. "Our Gang" (1971) belongs in this category. The novel, a brutal play in six acts, satirizes the Nixon administration. "Our Gang" was followed by "The Breast" (1972), a spoof on Kafka’s “Metamorphosis” in which the protagonist transforms into a giant breast. And then there was the aforementioned "Great American Novel," for me the most difficult to enjoy of Roth’s books. "Gang," "Breast," and "Great
American stand as his most overtly and ambitiously comic works. In this series of novels, Roth returns to mine the radical brand of humor that made *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969) such a comic tour de force, but none of the three books that followed it achieved anything like *Portnoy’s* influence on pop-culture.

Other than Alexander Portnoy, Nathan Zuckerman may be Roth’s most well known protagonist. In 1974’s *My Life as a Man*, Roth introduced what would become his longest-running alter ego, who makes his second appearance in *The Ghost Writer* (1979). *Ghost Writer* features a young Zuckerman, promising author of a few stories, who accepts an invitation to visit his literary idol, E.I. Lonoff. What ensues is part fantasy (Lonoff has a young female assistant whom Zuckerman imagines is Anne Frank), part dramatization of the relationship between fiction and reality, and part rumination on the discipline of writing and how it sometimes interferes with other kinds of living. All are recurring themes in Roth’s work.

By Zuckerman’s third appearance in *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981), he is the rich, famous, and hounded author of *Carnovsky*, a novel corresponding to *Portnoy’s Complaint* in terms of blockbuster status and taboo subject matter. Next in the series is *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), with Zuckerman laid low by back pain. The only place he finds any respite is on the floor where he is serviced by four women, all the while struggling to maintain his sanity amidst a combination of drugs and stress. The novel ends on a low note, with Zuckerman as a patient in the hospital, roaming the corridors “with the interns at night, as though he still believed that he could unchain himself from a future as a man
apart and escape the corpus that was his” (449). These closing lines liken Zuckerman’s tortured body to his body of work, and the novel stands as testimony to the isolating effects of fame, physical pain, and psychological torment.

The hard times came to a head when Roth suffered his breakdown. Passages of Operation Shylock (1993) fictionalize this illness, attributed (in the novel) to sleeping pills. If one had been asked during this time to predict the future of the middle-aged writer’s career, the prognosis would not have been good. His mind was gone, his body going. He had written some good books, some bad, but had not been able to top the sales figures of Portnoy, nor the National Book Award of his first effort, Goodbye, Columbus (1959). One of his many harsh critics might have written him off as a has-been—albeit an important one. But in one of the great literary turnarounds of all time, Roth’s breakdown did not prefigure his end, only a second beginning.

As Timothy Parrish notes in his introduction to The Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth, the subject of artistic second chances makes a prescient appearance in Ghost Writer when Zuckerman notices Lonoff is reading Henry James’s “The Middle Years,” a story about a writer who dies without completing his great work: “‘A second chance,’ James’s artist says, ‘that’s the delusion. There never was but one’” (7). Parrish goes on to point out that in Roth’s essay on Bernard Malamud, Roth “projects his own ‘Middle Years’ nightmare on to Malamud,” depicting “the abject helplessness Malamud must have felt while dying before he had the opportunity to rework his sentences into
something memorable” (7). But unlike James’s character or the dying Malamud, Roth did indeed receive—or more probably—willed himself a second chance.

In a 2004 review of *The Plot Against America*, Erik Tarloff begins with the following exclamation about the novelist’s late renaissance: “It is not clear when precisely it happened, but at some point while our backs were turned Philip Roth seems to have metamorphosed from enfant terrible into old master” (“Unmistakably”). Even if we can’t locate the exact moment, we can pin down the period when the tide started to turn. In 1987, around the time of his breakdown, Roth ended a long dry spell of not winning major awards for his books by winning the National Book Critics Circle Award for *The Counterlife* (1987); *Patrimony* (1991), a memoir about the illness and death of his elderly father, was likewise recognized. In 1993 *Operation Shylock* won a PEN/Faulkner, *Sabbath’s Theatre* (1995) received a National Book Award, and in ’97 *American Pastoral* won the Pulitzer. In ’98 Roth was awarded a National Medal of Arts. It should be noted that awards are not the only (and certainly not the best) way of evaluating a writer’s career. They reveal little else than how one book fared among a small group of critics within the context of other notable books published in one particular year. Still, awards (along with sales figures) are one quantitative measure of success (i.e., cultural influence), and along with critical responses (and the writer’s own response to his work), they are one of the few measures available without the benefit of great hindsight. In a hundred years it may not matter much that Roth won the NBCCA in 1987, but it undoubtedly mattered to Roth in the moment, and it did signal a burst of creativity to come.
Parrish agrees that 1986 was a pivotal year for Roth: “In retrospect, 1986 can be seen as a kind of turning point for [him] because he was on the cusp of what would become in effect his mature phase” (4). Of course such moments are seldom visible for what they are when they happen; they only appear clearly in hindsight. This kind of retrospection is useful not only to the critic, but to the writer, whose task it is to craft a series of disparate events into a coherent arc. Retrospection has proven especially useful to Roth, who as Parrish says, has “perhaps been his own best critic”:

The remarkable recent American Trilogy (American Pastoral, I Married a Communist [1998], and The Human Stain [2000]) provides an instance of Roth’s own rereading of his previous literary accomplishments: in these volumes, he returns to Nathan Zuckerman, who was so central to his work of the 1950’s, 1960’s, and 1970’s, but does so with a new understanding of his and our pasts. (3)

It’s unclear what Parrish means by saying that Zuckerman was central to Roth’s work of the 50’s and 60’s, because Zuckerman doesn’t make his first appearance until 1974. But what Parrish probably means is that the Zuckerman of the first four books featuring him (Ghost Writer, Unbound, Anatomy Lesson, Prague Orgy) is typically concerned with himself: his career, family, love life, physical, psychological and political troubles. Zuckerman is depicted in Ghost Writer at the point in his writerly development that is analogous to that of Roth circa 1958—just when things are starting to take off for him. Zuckerman is born at this moment of vocational realization, and the Roth of 1979 is reflecting in Ghost Writer about a time in his life that is now twenty years past. In this sense
Zuckerman has always been a retrospective narrator for Roth, a way for him to “reread his literary accomplishments.” What has changed for Zuckerman and Roth, however, is the chronological length of the retrospective, and its subject matter.

While the Zuckerman of the late 1970’s and early 80’s is primarily concerned with the development of Zuckerman, as an artist and personality, the Zuckerman of the American Trilogy often fades into the background to tell the story of a character tangential to his own life, but who comes to represent something iconic about American life. In American Pastoral, for instance, Zuckerman begins as the narrator and is a character in several of the introductory scenes, but the book quickly becomes the story of “Swede” Levov and his family, with Zuckerman making no appearance in the latter half.

Likewise, in The Human Stain, Zuckerman is a secondary character to Coleman Silk, a black man able to pass for most of his life as a white Jew. Ironically, Silk is forced out of his university job by spurious accusations of racism, taking the secret of his origins with him to the grave, though no secret is safe from Zuckerman’s literary detective work. A similar frame-tale structure operates in I Married a Communist, the story of Ira Ringold, a broadcaster who falls victim to McCarthyism. In the American Trilogy Roth turns Zuckerman’s retrospective eye from himself and onto other characters, not necessarily his intimates, sometimes no more than passing acquaintances, but who become fully realized and even larger-than-life when projected through a novelistic imagination. Like their predecessors, the novels in this trilogy are heavily
psychological, but also feature a socio-historical element that is less prominent in the first Zuckerman quartet. This is not to say American history or culture plays no role in the first four books, but it is not the primary subject. One of the many achievements of the American Trilogy is the sublimation of this individual psychology into a broader cultural narrative. Zuckerman reveals his persona not only in the language he uses, but in the tales he chooses to tell: the stories are all tragedies.

After winning the Pulitzer for *American Pastoral*, the pace of the accolades started to pick up for Roth. In a flurry of critical recognition spanning seven years, Roth won several of the highest distinctions available to an author, including the PEN/Saul Bellow Award for Achievement in American Fiction (2007). Roth must have been asking himself where the critics were twenty-five years earlier, back when even after writing a great book, he couldn’t win a commensurate award. The 1980 Pulitzer committee selected *Ghostwriter* for that year’s prize in fiction, but the board overrode their decision and chose Mailer’s *The Executioner’s Song* instead (McDowell). And before that disappointment there was the best-selling *Portnoy’s Complaint*, cultural touchstone, included on several 100-greatest lists (*Time, Modern Library*), but also a failure at winning awards upon publication. To the contrary, the novel caused several prominent critics to turn against Roth. This lack of critical recognition might not have been as frustrating as one imagines if he hadn’t started his career by winning a National Book Award when he was only twenty-six years old. Being hailed as the next big thing right out of the gate—by people
like Saul Bellow, no less—becomes a blessing and a curse. The early validation of one’s talented efforts must be sweet, but afterwards comes the nagging pressure to top the first offering, to prove it’s not a fluke.

One can feel this pressure at work in the two novels that followed *Columbus: Letting Go* and *When She Was Good*. In these books Roth’s style morphs into something more Jamesian and baroque. In *The Facts*, his “autobiography” (it contains a metafictional letter from Zuckerman critiquing its accuracy), Roth mentions “the awesome graduate-school authority of Henry James, whose *Portrait of a Lady* had been a virtual handbook during the early drafts of *Letting Go*” (157). As another literary source he singles out Flaubert, inspiration for *When She Was Good* (157). In these first two novels Roth applies a conservative, even reactionary writing style (reactionary in the sense of being from the past, from James and Flaubert) to edgy, modern subjects like divorce, premarital sex and abortion.

After *When She Was Good* he breaks out of the Jamesian/Flaubertian mode with a bang, writing *Portnoy’s Complaint*, which might be described as the inverse of James’s understatement. Here the subject matter remains sexual, but the style becomes manically colloquial, ranting. Roth describes the writing of *Portnoy* this way:

A fourth book, unlike any I’d written before in both its exuberance and its design, had been completed in a burst of hard work. What had begun as a hopped-up, semifalsified version of an analytic monologue that might have been mine, by diverting more and more from mine through its mounting hyperbole [...] had gradually been transformed into a full-scale
comical counteranalysis [...] It was a book that had rather less to do with “freeing” me from my Jewishness or from my family (the purpose divined by many, who were convinced by the evidence of Portnoy’s Complaint that the author had to be on bad terms with both) than with liberating me from an apprentice’s literary models. (Facts 157)

Like the adept ventriloquist he is, Roth had found a new voice that was at once his own and not (and definitely not James’s or Flaubert’s), and by doing so achieved a second hit, which like Columbus ignited a critical firestorm and accusations of anti-Semitism. The role of provocateur has generally been a successful one for him.

Roth’s career continues as of this writing even as he passes the mean lifespan for a human male, a fact that hasn’t escaped his work. Death has always figured into his fiction, but lately has assumed a new prominence, almost to the point of becoming the idée fixe. Zuckerman is killed off in 2007’s Exit Ghost, not on the page, but as the Shakespearean title suggests, Roth’s long-time narrator fades away, distinctly a specter of his former self. The novel’s closing lines describe the actions of an unnamed “he” character in a scene written by Zuckerman: “He disintegrates. She’s on her way and he leaves. Gone for good” (292). Immediately preceding Exit Ghost is Everyman (2006), described by Tarloff as a prolonged meditation on death. Tarloff asks if there is any great aesthetic or redemptive value in Everyman to “lift its gloom” or “suggest any solace.” He concludes there is not, but is ultimately kind to the work and believes Everyman represents a shift in tone for Roth, “the possibility of consolation”:

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Everyman is a harrowing book, and one’s admiration for it is rarely tainted by easy pleasure. But does it perhaps point the way for Roth’s future work? He has demonstrated the will and courage to stare death in the face unblinkingly. Is it now time for him also to re-examine life? (“Roth’s”)

As if taking a cue from this exhortation, in 2008 Roth published his latest novel, *Indignation*, whose narrator is trapped in a hellish afterlife. This spirit can do nothing other than examine his life, over and over for all eternity. But if Tarloff was hoping for an affirmation of that life or of human goodness in general, it is not to be found in *Indignation*, one of Roth’s darkest and most cynical books, in which the Korean War serves as a symbol of pointless and brutal slaughter, death unavoidable, just waiting for you to slip up.

Other than the Nobel, there is little else for Roth to achieve as an author, quantitatively speaking. But the perks of fame do not seem to be what drives him. He leads a notoriously monastic life that (other than through his fiction) he has chosen not to live publicly. Neither has he sat back and enjoyed the fruits of his labor—if anything, his output has increased as he has aged into the canon. His self-reinvention will likely continue at a frenetic pace until there is no self left for him to explore.
CHAPTER 1

“Defender of the Faith”: War as Conflicted Identity

When I was younger my Jewish betters used to accuse me of writing short stories that endangered Jewish lives—would that I could! A narrative as deadly as a gun!

- *Operation Shylock*

There is nothing superior in being Jewish—and there is nothing inferior or degrading. You are Jewish, and that’s it. That’s the story.

- *I Married a Communist*

As Rothberg makes clear in “Roth and the Holocaust,” Roth has explored the effects of the “European catastrophe on Jewish-American identity” in various works that span the breadth of his career (51). Rothberg, however, is also careful to point out that the Holocaust is not a “constant presence” in Roth’s work, and that some critics have overstated the case (52). This is probably true—a great many of Roth’s works contain no overt mention of the Holocaust. Still, it is hard to believe that for a Jewish writer concerned with representing post-war identity, the Nazi war crimes are ever absent from mind. Certainly the Holocaust lies buried just beneath the surface in “The Defender of the Faith,” a story of war and conflicted ethnic identity, collected in Roth’s first book.

But before discussing the story, we should examine the conflicts surrounding ethnic identity that characterized the critical response to it. From the very beginning critics have approached Roth through his ethnicity, viewing
him as a Jewish-American writer. This seems like a reasonable approach, but we would be remiss to assume it is correct, or at least to explore what is meant by it. The question becomes: Who should be called a Jewish writer? This is not as silly a question as it sounds. Some Jewish writers, like Roth, are deeply involved in their Jewishness, but others don’t appear to be at all. The difficulty is in determining which Jews write Jewish fiction. David Brauner discusses this definitional problem in the first chapter of his book, Post-War Jewish Fiction. He points out the ambiguities and inconsistencies inherent in categorizing fiction by the ethnicity of its author, using Kafka as an example:

In [Kafka’s] work the word ‘Jew’ never appears [... yet he] is acclaimed by many critics as the most quintessentially Jewish of writers [....] How can Ilan Stavans reconcile his decision to exclude from The Oxford Book of Jewish Stories (1998) Norman Mailer and Gertrude Stein on the grounds that they are “not openly engaged in their Jewishness” while including a story by Kafka? Stavans asks the question “Is [Kafka] a Jewish author?” and then answers “Well, of course,” without explaining what it is that makes him one. (8)

Having noted the problems that accompany categorizing authors, especially along ethnic lines, it’s hard to fault scholars who approach Roth through his ethnic identity—not the only possible approach, but a useful one. His protagonists are typically Jewish men (many of whom happen to be famous authors), and Roth goes so far as to name some of them after himself. On the other hand, writing fiction is to leave one’s head, to try others on for size, and as Samuel Cohen notes, it would be wrong to assume that Zuckerman or any of his other alter egos are intended as straightforward authorial stand-ins, as a
“camera lens” through which to document thinly fictionalized autobiography. To do so would be to miss “Roth’s complicatedly ironic stance” towards these characters (14).

People have been missing the irony ever since Roth’s first stories started coming out. Some of these are collected in Goodbye, Columbus, a book that received a variety of impassioned critical responses. On the one extreme it garnered the twenty-six year-old a National Book Award; on the other, accusations of being a self-hating Jew. Irving Howe was a critic who defended Roth against these early charges before later changing his opinion as a result of Portnoy’s Complaint, a novel that caused him to accuse Roth of transgressions against the Jewish community (Parrish 129). In a case of life imitating art, or vice versa, stories of intra-Jewish conflict engendered the real-life version. Brauner describes the nature of the conflict this way:

The sin that dared not speak its name was self-hatred: what inflamed Howe and the others was not just the suspicion that Roth was inciting anti-Semitism with his portraits of licentious, blasphemous Jews like Alexander Portnoy, but the accompanying realization that they could not afford to acknowledge such ghetto fears openly. A sophisticated critic like Howe could not bring himself to accuse Roth directly of washing the dirty linen of the Jews in public, so he had to generalize his attack and speak instead of his “need to rub our noses in the muck of squalid daily existence.” (156)

This is a powerful, but not completely accurate critique of Howe, who does in fact accuse Roth of inciting anti-Semitism, and does it in no uncertain terms. In the essay in question, “Roth Reconsidered,” Howe lays out his rationale for
forsaking the writer he had once praised. Towards the end of the piece he is quite explicit about an “important role” which he says *Portnoy* played in American culture. Although he doesn’t describe it with the phrase “washing the dirty linen of the Jews,” he might as well have:

> After the Second World War, as a consequence of certain unpleasantnesses that occurred during the war, a wave of philo-Semitism swept through our culture. This wave lasted for all of two decades, in the course of which books by Jewish writers were often praised (in truth, overpraised) and a fuss made about Jewish intellectuals, critics, etc. Some literary people found this hard to bear, but they did. Once *Portnoy’s Complaint* arrived, however, they could almost be heard breathing a sigh of relief, for it signaled an end to philo-Semitism in American culture, one no longer had to listen to all that talk about Jewish morality, Jewish endurance, Jewish wisdom, Jewish families. Here was Philip Roth himself, a writer who even seemed to know Yiddish, confirming what had always been suspected about those immigrant Jews but had recently not been tactful to say. (86)

Howe’s coy description of the Holocaust (“certain unpleasantnesses”) leaves a bad taste in one’s mouth, and it is an open question as to what extent the philo-Semitic tide or its receding as a direct result of *Portnoy* was a real cultural phenomena, but there is no doubt that Howe openly accuses Roth of inciting anti-Semitism (or anti-philo-Semitism), of washing the dirty laundry of the Jews, of giving those who hate them an excuse.

The preponderance of Howe’s critique, however, revolves not around Roth’s anti-Semitism, but his vulgarity, his cruelty to his characters, his “shriek of excess,” his “swelling nausea before the ordinariness of human existence, its
seepage of spirit and rotting of flesh” (81-2). In short, Howe attacks Roth on all fronts: Roth is gross, mean, a one-trick pony, and possesses a “thin personal culture” to boot. “Reconsidering Roth” might instead be titled, “Disemboweling Roth”; it is that vicious an assault. In return Roth is equally nasty to the critic characters in his novels, especially in the first Zuckerman quartet. Milton Appel, a critic hostile to Zuckerman, is widely considered to be Howe by another name. Howe died in 1993, and one wonders if he would have reconsidered his reconsideration with the benefit of the American Trilogy. Perhaps the two old foes could have reached an uneasy truce.

Speaking of these critical thrusts and authorial parries, Brauner goes on to say that Roth, “infuriated by the injustice of the attacks on him and yet tormented by a nagging sense of guilt induced by their cumulative vehemence,” responded by conducting a “sustained and unstinting self-inquiry,” introducing himself and characters such as Zuckerman in his stories, putting himself and his art on trial and thereby creating the sub-genre of self-accusative fiction (159). The foils, the prosecutors of the protagonists in these trial-by-fictions, are usually other Jews. Brauner suggests these Jewish antagonists make their way into Roth’s fiction because of his guilt over being called an anti-Semite, but in fact they appear before Howe or any other critic ever accused Roth of self-hatred. The Jewish antagonist is present from the very beginning, in the stories that started the anti-Semitic controversy in the first place. One such piece is “Defender of the Faith,” and its antagonist is given the name Sheldon Grossbart.
Grossbart, an army recruit, comes into conflict with his superior, Nathan Marx, who is the narrator. Marx, a young infantry sergeant, is confident, emotionally intelligent, stoic—yet in full possession of a wry sense of humor, the ability to find the comic in the tragic:

In May of 1945, only a few weeks after the fighting had ended in Europe, I was rotated back to the States, where I spent the remainder of the war in a training company at Camp Crowder, Missouri [....] I had changed enough in two years not to mind the trembling of the old people, the crying of the very young, the uncertainty and fear in the eyes of the once arrogant. I had been fortunate enough to develop an infantryman’s heart, which, like his feet, at first aches and swells but finally grows horny enough for him to travel the weirdest paths without feeling a thing. (125)

Camp Crowder actually existed in southeast Missouri, but taken figuratively the name suggests an important cultural function of the U.S. military—and a major theme of the story—the sometimes uncomfortable packing-together of people from vastly different backgrounds. The military continues to be one of the most culturally and economically diverse of our national institutions. It was racially integrated before society at large and is a place where the sons and daughters of the elite, schooled at West Point or Annapolis, rub elbows with convicted felons and high school dropouts. More than actual battle, “Defender” is about the conflicts that arise from this cultural crowding.

Upon arriving at Crowder, Nathan Marx becomes first sergeant (the highest-ranking enlisted man) of his training company, commanded by Captain
Paul Barrett, a WASP who congratulates himself on his meritocratic “open mind,”

all the while belying a latent racism:

“Marx, I’d fight side by side with a nigger if the fella proved to me he was a man [.....] Consequently, Sergeant, nobody gets special treatment here, for the good or the bad. All a man’s got to do is prove himself. A man fires well on the range, I give him a weekend pass. He scores high in P.T., he gets a weekend pass. He *earns* it.” He turned from the window and pointed a finger at me. “You’re a Jewish fella, am I right, Marx?” (125)

But despite his status as authority figure and his buffoonish bigotry,

Captain Barrett is not the antagonist of the story—that role is played by

Grossbart, Marx’s fellow Jew. The conflict between them is an example of Roth’s impressive command of dramatic irony. Grossbart is not simply a Jew who, for whatever reason, happens to come into conflict with Marx; it is the two men’s shared faith that *creates* the conflict. Roth has described it this way:

> It is about one man who uses his own religion, and another’s uncertain conscience, for selfish ends; but mostly it is about this other man, the narrator, who because of the ambiguities of being a member of a particular religion, is involved in a taxing, if mistaken, conflict of loyalties. (qtd. in Howe 78)

The selfish man, Sheldon Grossbart, approaches his first sergeant and introduces himself, assuming by Marx’s last name that he is Jewish: “We thought you—Marx, you know, like Karl Marx. The Marx Brothers. Those guys are all—M-a-r-x. Isn’t that how you spell it, Sergeant?” (127). Although Grossbart’s associations with Marx’s name are literal, they contain deeper levels of meaning.

The allusion to comedians comes in a line of dialog that reads as comic, a
moment of self-referentiality that indicates how to classify the story. Not as light comedy—Roth doesn’t do much of that—but “Defender,” a hard story to pin down, comes closest to being a black comedy. The hero comes out on top, and the villain is punished in an ending that is humorous, sad and serious at the same time.

If Grossbart’s reference to Harpo and Groucho indicates the form of the story, and his name (Barrett repeatedly mistakes it for “Grossman”) suggests his villainous role, his reference to Karl Marx hints at the conflict, the needs of a community clashing with the selfish demands and tribal loyalties of individuals. This plot is set into motion when Grossbart makes an increasingly obnoxious series of impositions and pleas for special favor from Marx.

At first these requests are innocuous enough. Grossbart says he is upset that the company’s G.I. parties (an event that entails scrubbing every inch of the barracks) are held on Friday night at the same time as shul. If he and the other Jewish personnel leave duty to attend services, as is their right, the gentile troops accuse them of goldbricking. Grossbart brings this to Marx’s attention, and Marx orders the Charge of Quarters to remind the men that “they’re free to attend church services whenever they are held” (129). Later, on his way to shul, Grossbart thanks Marx for this “formal” and “public” pronouncement, which he believes will silence the grousing of the other troops. He then invites Marx to come along with him to services. Marx refuses and tells him to get moving, but after Grossbart leaves, Marx is unexpectedly reminded of his childhood and indulges “in a reverie so strong I felt as though a hand were reaching down
inside me” (132). This hand must reach past a great many painful memories to grasp what Marx “suddenly remembered was myself”:

It had to reach past those days in the forests of Belgium, and past the dying I’d refused to weep over; past the nights in German farmhouses whose books we’d burned to warm us; past endless stretches when I had shut off all softness I might feel for my fellows, and had managed even to deny myself the posture of a conqueror—the swagger that I, as a Jew, might well have worn as my boots whacked against the rubble of Wesel, Münster, and Braunschweig. (132)

What Marx suddenly remembers is nothing less than his Jewish identity:

“In search of more of me, I found myself following Grossbart’s tracks to Chapel No. 3, where the Jewish services were being held” (132). Marx arrives there and takes a seat in a back pew where he is able to observe Grossbart, whose prayer book remains closed on his lap as he sips the sacramental wine at an inappropriate time. Another private notices their first sergeant in attendance and elbows Grossbart, who then opens his prayer book and begins participating diligently. It becomes obvious that Grossbart is not pious and is exploiting his faith for selfish reasons. After things wrap up, Marx interrogates his soldiers on whether their religion is important to them and to what degree they keep kosher. Grossbart admits services are important, “Not so much at home [....] but away from home it gives one a sense of his Jewishness” (134). He then says, “What happened in Germany [...was that the Jews] didn’t stick together. They let themselves get pushed around” (134).
Like Marx recalling the swagger he denied himself as Jewish conqueror of the Nazis, and like Irving Howe in his critique of Roth, Grossbart hints at the Holocaust without naming it. But when the story is set in 1945, the Holocaust couldn't be named, at least not as a proper noun whose full weight was widely understood. Unlike Howe, who penned his strangely cute phrase ("certain unpleasantnesses") in 1972, well after scholars and popular writers had begun referring to the genocide as the Holocaust, the characters in "Defender" can be forgiven for not being able to articulate the magnitude of the slaughter, which was just being discovered (Niewyk 45).

This understated Holocaust, hinted at but never named, is part of what gives the story the moral seriousness Howe finds so remarkable. With the benefit of hindsight the reader fills in the blanks, and this knowledge provides the dark backdrop upon which the characters act out a wartime conflict, without violence on the page, but which has life and death consequences because of how it is foregrounded. But as Rothberg points out in The Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth, there are risks to putting so much at stake, to writing such a vital conflict. These risks include offending an impassioned readership for whom the knowledge of the real-life Holocaust was painfully immediate:

What probably made the story so disturbing for some members of the Jewish community was the [...] suggestion, incarnated in Grossbart, that the emergence of consciousness of the extreme could so easily become the occasion for sentimental, politically interested claims to ethnic solidarity. In ["Defender"] there is a call to recognize the specificity of a genocide that does not yet have a proper name and [...] a warning to avoid turning
that event into ethnic property and cultural capital.
(57)

The suggestion that the Holocaust could be used as political capital was one reason why some found “Defender” offensive; another was Roth’s choice to include a character who seems to conform to certain anti-Semitic stereotypes: Jews as selfish, unpatriotic, conniving. For writing a Grossbart, Roth was accused of being a self-hating Jew. He explains his choice to write about Jewish characters, good and bad, as a non-choice:

I never for a moment considered that the characters in [“Defender”] should be anything other than Jews. Someone else might have written a story embodying the same themes, and similar events perhaps, and had at its center Negroes or Irishmen; for me there was no choice” (qtd. In Girgus 166).

Like Marx describing a hand reaching inside himself, a force seemingly outside his control as it delves beneath the surface for the font of identity, Roth feels no choice but to write about Jews, to grasp at who he is with the hand of fiction. He must write the story about Jews because he is one—for him it’s as simple as that. His portrayal of Grossbart is not an indictment of a religion, but of a certain type of person. The story is not anti-Semitic; it is Semitically inquiring, meaning that it explores what it means to be Jewish. But it is also more than this—it is a universal inquiry. Not only a Jewish hero (in the sense of being a hero only to Jews), Marx becomes a democratic American hero, a humanistic hero (albeit a tortured one), who happens to have been born a Jew (Guttman 55). In his fullness as a human being, Marx refutes the stereotypes, positive and negative, surrounding Jewish people. Like everyone he is both flawed and good,
and like all intelligent people he both embraces and is in conflict with his identity.

He begins to express this conflict when Grossbart writes a fraudulent letter in the guise of his own father, complaining to a congressman about the lack of kosher food in the mess hall. The complaint works its way down the chain of command until Captain Barrett gets an earful about it from his superior and calls Marx into his office. Marx hasn’t yet learned the letter is a fraud and tries to defend Grossbart’s father and their shared ethnicity against Barrett’s incredulous anger:

“I’d like to punch him one right in the mouth,” the Captain said. “There’s a war on, and he wants a silver platter!”

“I don’t think the boy’s to blame, sir. I’m sure we can straighten it out by just asking him. Jewish parents worry—”

“All parents worry, for Christ’s sake. But they don’t get on their high horse and start pulling strings—”

I interrupted, my voice higher, tighter than before. “The home life, Captain, is very important—but you’re right, it may sometimes get out of hand. It’s a very wonderful thing, Captain, but because it’s so close, this kind of thing...”

He didn’t listen any longer to my attempt to present both myself and Lightfoot Harry with an explanation for the letter. He turned back to the phone. “Sir?” he said. “Sir—Marx, here, tells me Jews have a tendency to be pushy. He says he thinks we can settle it right here in the company...Yes, sir...I will call back, sir, soon as I can.” He hung up. “Where are the men, Sergeant?”

“On the range.”

With a whack on the top of his helmet, he crushed it down over his eyes again, and charged out of his chair. “We’re going for a ride,” he said.
In this exchange one feels the push and pull of ethnic identity on multiple levels: within Marx, in his waffling, half-hearted defense of the “home life,” and between Marx and Barrett, each man reduced to articulating stereotypes: one positive, the other negative. Barrett’s action at the end of the exchange trumps talk, however, and the two authority figures ride out to the range to question Grossbart, who claims he wants to keep kosher and only eats enough of the mess hall food to survive. Barrett asks him if he’s angling for a discharge: “What is it you want? The little piece of paper? You want out?” Grossbart says no, only that he wants “to be allowed to live as a Jew” (138).

At this point in the story Grossbart becomes something more than your typical goldbricker. Up to the scene on the range his actions have seemed motivated by the straightforward desire to do as little work as possible, but when given the chance to get out of the service entirely, he turns it down. Like Melville’s Bartleby, Grossbart becomes a force of nature, a symbol of human irrationality and stubbornness. Grossbart would prefer to remain in the army and act as an irritant, rather than obtain what he would appear to want, his freedom. In response, and before tempting Grossbart a second time with a discharge, Barrett attempts to shame him by praising Marx as a hero:

Barrett blew up. “Look, Grossbart, Marx, here, is a good man—a goddam hero. When you were in high school, Sergeant Marx was killing Germans. Who does more for the Jews—you, by throwing up over a lousy piece of sausage, a piece of first-cut meat, or Marx, by killing those Nazi bastards? If I was a Jew, Grossbart, I’d kiss this man’s feet. He’s a goddam hero, and he eats what we give him. Why do you
have to cause trouble is what I want to know! What is it you’re buckin’ for—a discharge?” (139)

The theme of the Jewish hero continues later in the same scene when, after Barrett has thrown up his hands and torn off in his jeep, a sardonic Marx calls Grossbart “a regular Messiah.” Grossbart turns the tables on him: “Maybe you’re the Messiah—a little bit. What Mickey says is the Messiah is a collective idea [...] He says together we’re the Messiah. Me a little bit, you a little bit” (141). The dutiful sergeant and malingering private finish what Barrett started, elevating each other to the status of religious symbol: one iconic in his selfless heroism, the other in his stubborn guile. Of course neither man thinks of himself in these terms—certainly Grossbart doesn’t see himself as a bad person—but by this point the reader has firmly identified the roles of the protagonist and antagonist, hero and villain. Marx is being ironic when he calls Grossbart the Messiah, and Grossbart is trying to cement alliances with his talk of community, but what is said ironically can sometimes ring true, sometimes because of the irony, and the reader wonders what archetypal forces are at work here, whether Roth intends seriously what he has his characters say as a joke or a ploy.

After the scene on the range Grossbart drops the kosher bit, and two days later another letter from his “father” (by this time Marx knows Grossbart is the author) appears on Captain Barrett’s desk, and then Marx’s. The letter tells how Grossbart’s father was finally able to convince his son to “suffer the pangs of religious remorse for the good of his country and all mankind,” and commends Sergeant Marx for his role in this. The letter stands as the most egregious
example in the story of the Holocaust being used as a pawn in someone’s selfish
game, when Grossbart, writing in the third person, puts lofty-sounding words in
his own mouth:

In fact, what he said (and I wrote down the words on
a scratch pad so as never to forget), what he said
was “I guess you’re right, Dad. So many millions of
my fellow-Jews gave up their lives to the enemy, the
least I can do is live for a while minus a bit of my
heritage so as to help end this struggle and regain
for all the children of God dignity and humanity.”
That, Congressman, would make any father proud.
(142)

After recanting his protest against the mess hall food, Grossbart retreats
for a time from Marx’s life. Marx wonders why—whether Grossbart has actually
had a change of heart and reconsidered his position, or if he is conducting “a
strategic retreat—a crafty attempt to strengthen what he considered our
alliance” (142). The use of martial language to describe an interpersonal conflict
born of religion further cements the analogy begun by the title of the story
(national service is to religious service). The question the title begs, however,
still remains: What is the faith and who is defending it?

In an ironically literal sense, Grossbart is the defender, pressing his
superiors for kosher food and the time to go to shul, bravely lobbying for the
surface trappings of religion. But beneath the surface he is always positioning
himself for maximum personal benefit. He is not in earnest, and the faith he
defends is ultimately not in Judaism but in himself. Marx, on the other hand, has
mostly forgotten his Jewish identity, but in the course of the story he rediscovers
it and undergoes a change. In her essay, “American-Jewish Identity in Roth’s Short Fiction,” Victoria Aarons describes this change, but only partially:

Ironically, it is through the opportunistic, disingenuous, and manipulative Sheldon Grossbart, who, in his presumption of tribal familiarity, breaks ranks and assumes special privileges with an officer, that Nathan Marx, in out-maneuvering him, recognizes his obligations as a Jew. Uttered with weary resignation but also with Roth’s typical comic absurdity, Nathan Marx comes to admit that “like Karl and Harpo, I was one of them.” (12)

The phrase “obligations as a Jew” is vague (are these moral, ecclesiastical, dietary obligations?) and is part of what “Defender” seeks to explode—the idea that there is such a thing as a Jewish obligation, or that these obligations mean the same thing to any two different people. It is true that Marx’s self-identification oscillates from non-Jewish to Jewish, but his Jewishness is neither the ground of his identity nor the final destination of the story. The change in him is not primarily religious, and like Grossbart, what he defends is not primarily Judaism. It takes Grossbart’s reappearance in his life for Marx to discover how he has changed and what he is defending.

Grossbart resurfaces on a Sunday to ask a favor, the biggest one yet. He wants Marx to fill out a pass for him to leave camp and travel to Saint Louis, where his aunt has promised a Passover dinner. Marx tells Grossbart what Grossbart already knows: no passes during basic. They argue, and Grossbart accuses Marx of being a self-hating Jew: “Ashamed, that’s what you are [...] So you take it out on the rest of us. They say Hitler himself was half a Jew. Hearing you, I wouldn’t doubt it” (145). At the level of the story this scene is about Marx’s
crisis of identity—he must be angry, mortified, and perhaps feeling guilty to hear himself compared to the anti-Semitic tyrant he has just come from fighting. But on the metafictional plane, this is also one of those moments when a story seems to defend itself against the criticism it knows will be leveled against it. By having the antagonist accuse the narrator of hating his ethnicity, Roth seeks to defuse the same charge against himself, to dramatize how such allegations can, like appeals to the Holocaust, be made facetiously and for selfish reasons.

A ways into the argument with Grossbart, Marx realizes Passover was a month ago. Caught in a lie, Grossbart claims his aunt is making the meal a month late because he was in the field during the actual holiday. Marx continues to refuse to write the pass, and Grossbart leaves, crying. An hour later, Marx catches him about to go AWOL, and rather than have this happen he changes his mind, shows mercy and types out a pass. But being himself, Grossbart has to push further. He leaves and shows up a few minutes later with two fellow-Jewish trainees, Fishbein and Halpern, who function as his passive henchmen throughout the story. At first Marx declines to write any more passes, but he has already given an inch. Grossbart offers his pass to Halpern in a final display of calculated selflessness, securing a weekend of freedom for all three recruits.

That afternoon Marx sits in a bar in Joplin, drinking beer and wondering if he might be to blame in the struggle with Grossbart. He asks himself, “What was I that I had to muster generous feelings? Who was I to have been feeling so grudging, so tight-hearted?” (148). He then flashes back a final time to childhood, remembering how his grandmother used to scold his mother for making a fuss
when he had hurt himself doing something forbidden ("I need a hug and a kiss, and my mother would moralize") (149). Looking back and feeling sentimental, he sides with the morality of his grandmother, who knew that “mercy overrides justice” (149). In addition to the scene where he feels the invisible hand of reverie, the interlude in the Joplin bar shows Marx at his most tribal and familial. He identifies by blood: grandmother to mother to son (i.e., matrilineally, according to Jewish religious law), and the theme of blood identity is driven home when he returns to Crowder from the bar and discovers all his soldiers have orders for the Pacific. He then feels as shocked “as though I were the father of Halpern, Fishbein, and Grossbart” [emphasis mine] (149).

Marx’s childhood intrudes on his present, and the lessons he draws from it seem profound—but the story does present familial identification as a thing of the past, of one’s past, something that can only be flashed-back to. Marx’s present identity is a non-commissioned officer, what one might call his organizational or institutional identity. There is a tension between these past and present identities, and it is the tension of assimilation. Marx is a man torn between communities. As his name suggests, his is a communal identity, a mixture of communal identities: national, military, Jewish. By giving Grossbart a pass to attend Passover in violation of military rules, Marx demonstrates his loyalty to the community of faith. But when this loyalty is betrayed, he shows a side of himself that has been hidden throughout much of the story—the “horny heart” of an infantryman.
This chain of events is set in motion when Grossbart returns from his weekend of leave. He had promised to bring Marx gefilte fish, but all he brings is an eggroll. He claims his aunt wasn’t home to prepare the Passover meal; she had actually invited him for the following weekend; he misread her letter. This string of lies is the final straw for Marx, who becomes enraged and tells Grossbart that if he ever sees him again, he will make his life miserable (151).

By this time the trainees know they have orders for the Pacific, and the next week when Marx reviews these orders he discovers they are all in fact headed there—all except for one soldier, Grossbart, who has orders for Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, a duty station that is suspiciously cushy and close to his family’s home. Marx knows Grossbart has pulled strings to get this assignment, and he calls in a favor of his own to get it reversed, giving some lucky private the stateside duty, dooming Grossbart to island-hopping. Furious when he gets the amended orders, Grossbart confronts Marx. The two argue, and Grossbart finally reveals his selfishness in words:

“That’s right, twist things around. I owe nobody nothing. I’ve done all I could do for them. Now I think I’ve got the right to watch out for myself.”

“For each other we have to learn to watch out, Sheldon. You told me so yourself.”

“You call this watching out for me—what you did?”

“No. For all of us.” (154)

Marx claims that by changing Grossbart’s orders he is watching out “for all of us.” The story never makes clear to whom the pronoun refers—all us Jews, us soldiers, us Americans, us people? Furthermore, watching out for all of us is
what Marx says he is doing, but that doesn’t mean it is what he is doing. The final
lines of the story provide clues as to his true motivation:

With a kind of quiet nervousness, [the boys] polished shoes, shined belt buckles, squared away underwear, trying as best they could to accept their fate. Behind me, Grossbart swallowed hard, accepting his. And then, resisting with all my will an impulse to turn and seek pardon for my vindictiveness, I accepted my own. (154)

This is the note the story ends on—vengeance and guilt. But revenge on whose behalf? Guilt over what? “My will,” “my vindictiveness,” and the story’s final words, “my own,” all suggest selfishness. There are other indications Marx takes a personal revenge, rather than on behalf of any group. For one, he does not attempt to amend the orders to their original state, with all the trainees bound for the Pacific. If he were motivated mostly by a desire to look out “for all of us” (Americans), he would send every possible body to the front and correct the orders accordingly. He would follow the letter of military law and report his suspicions to Captain Barrett.

On the other hand, if he were motivated mostly by a desire to look out for all of us soldiers, he might let the orders stand (or change them), but would definitely make a public example of Grossbart, shame him in front of his fellow recruits, use him as a training tool to show the other privates what happens when you try to get ahead by shirking duty and screwing your buddy.

But Marx takes neither course of action. His revenge on Grossbart is individual and private. And if it is a quiet revenge on behalf of the Jews—condemning to possible death a villainous one, the Jewish antagonist, the one
who gives us a bad name—it violates the morality of his grandmother, who functions in the story as the root of good-hearted religious sentiment. Contrary to his grandmother’s beliefs, Marx’s actions demonstrate justice (or injustice) trumping mercy. He may be the defender of the Jews, but if so, the irony is he must hurt in order to heal. In any case he is uneasy with his decision and must resist the urge to seek forgiveness. The fate he accepts is his conflicted identity, a guilty conscience personified in Grossbart.

“Defender” is a story of ethnic conflict on local and global scales. While the global conflict is between armies—inter-ethnic, international—the local conflict is intra-ethnic and within an army. This is an ironic structure that Roth exploits elsewhere in his oeuvre, but perhaps nowhere better than in “Defender,” a story that has organic coherence and an intense moral core because of its unifying event: the Holocaust.
Killing other members of our own species—a rarity in the animal kingdom—is a male behavior that evolved early in our history, because those individuals who manifested such a predisposition were more likely to transmit their genes to the next generation than those who didn’t. War and violence, then, are indelibly linked to sex and reproduction. This does not mean that human beings are inherently murderous, however, nor that war is inevitably as much a part of our future as it is a fixture of our past.

- Potts and Hayden in *War and Sex*

*Indignation* begins with a similar irony as “Defender of the Faith”: a wartime setting from which the protagonist, Marcus Messner, is far removed, yet highly aware. The first sentence of the novel establishes this disconnected situation:

> About two and a half months after the well-trained divisions of North Korea, armed by the Soviets and Chinese Communists, crossed the 28th parallel into South Korea on June 25, 1950, and the agonies of the Korean War began, I entered Robert Treat, a small college in downtown Newark named for the city’s seventeenth-century founder. (1)

The rhetorical similarities with the first sentences of “Defender” are striking, and along with that story *Indignation* is among the few of Roth’s works to be narrated by a combat veteran. But unlike “Defender,” where Sergeant Marx’s experience in battle precedes the events of the narrative, Marcus’s deployment
to Korea provides *Indignation’s* hellish dénouement. Marx is a survivor, one of those charmed people who always seem to come out on top. Marcus is not so lucky.

The plot begins when to escape his overbearing father Marcus leaves New Jersey and transfers to Winesburg College, a small liberal arts school in Central Ohio. The allusion to Sherwood Anderson’s work underscores Roth’s return to a more traditionally realistic style of narrative than in his preceding novels, *Everyman* and *Exit Ghost*, and also highlights the coming-of-age quality of *Indignation*. But as is usually the case with Roth, there is an irony: Marcus comes of age only to die. He tells the story of his short life from an isolated void of an afterlife. If George Willard represents the potential of youth, Marcus Messner represents its denial. Not surprisingly, Roth cites *Winesburg* as an influential book, one he read when he was a teenager (*Facts* 40).

Marcus leaves home in New Jersey to avoid his overprotective father, and Roth also transferred out of state to avoid a “battle” with a worried parent (*Facts* 38). These similarities noted, *Indignation* is not fictionalized autobiography, or even thinly metafictionalized autobiography a la *The Facts*. *Indignation* has more in common with *The Plot Against America*. Both novels are alternate histories, books that ask the question, “What if?” In *Plot Against America* this is the supposition that Roosevelt loses the election to Lindberg. In *Indignation*, Roth writes the alternate history of a promising yet hardheaded young man who, instead of surviving adolescence to become a success like himself, is expelled from college, drafted, and killed in Korea.
In a counter-intuitive bid to avoid this fate, Marcus enrolls in ROTC. All male students are required to take one semester of military science, but by taking four Marcus can enter the army as a second lieutenant and quality for the Transportation Corps after graduation (33). In this way he plans to avoid the worst of what he considers the most “frightening” war America has ever fought, one waged against “wave after wave” of “premechanized” Chinese soldiers who still communicate via bugle call (31). In contrast to these premechanized hordes is the unique problem of modern warfare: nuclear annihilation, technology run amok. Marcus hates MacArthur for threatening to start a nuclear conflict with the Soviets, and his overall picture of the Korean War is of a politically futile slaughter enacted in a frozen wasteland. Marcus is naïve in many respects, but he has no illusions about death in battle being sweet or becoming. He has no desire to participate.

Sex provides a jump-start to the plot, as well as the thematic counterpoint to the imagined violence of Korea and the remembered violence of the Messner family butcher shop. Although two fraternities recruit him, Marcus refuses to join or to do much socializing with a series of failed roommates; however, he does have designs on Olivia Hutton, a pale and slender sophomore transfer student who sits beside him in class. Eventually he works up the courage to take her to L’Escargot (“the fanciest restaurant in Sandusky County”) and then to park on a deserted road on the outskirts of town (50). What happens next surprises the virginal Marcus when, without “even asking for it,” Olivia fellates him.
At this pivotal moment we also learn the occasion for narration: Marcus is remembering the past from an afterlife defined by paradox, non-existence and absence:

Even now (if “now” can be said to mean anything any longer), beyond corporeal existence, alive as I am here (if “here” or “I” means anything) as memory alone (if “memory,” strictly speaking, is the all-embracing medium in which I am being sustained as “myself”), I continue to puzzle over Olivia’s actions. Is that what eternity is for, to muck over a lifetime’s minutiae? [...] As a nonbeliever, I assumed that the afterlife was without a clock, a body, a brain, a soul, a god—without anything of any shape, form, or substance, decomposition absolute. I did not know that it was not only not without remembering but that remembering would be the everything. (56)

The ghostly frame of the novel—the eternal remembering—recalls the task of the elderly yet driven novelist, Zuckerman, wracked with back pain, rendered impotent and incontinent by a prostatectomy, unable or unwilling to do much but recall a past that, as Marcus describes it, cannot “be relived in the immediacy of the realm of sensation, but merely replayed” (Indignation 57). This eternal hindsight seems hellishly lonely, but it gives Marcus as narrator a maturity he never has in life, where he doesn’t know quite how to relate to his new girlfriend.

After the encounter in the car, Marcus gives Olivia the cold shoulder, unable to believe she did what she did because she “wanted it to happen” (57). At the time he is baffled by her promiscuousness and attributes the blowjob to her broken home, but with the benefit of timelessness he acknowledges his (and his culture’s) prudishness: “That was not the way it went between a
conventionally brought-up boy and a nice, well-bred girl when I was alive and it was 1951 and, for the third time in just over half a century, America was at war again” (58). Sexual repression and war are placed in close syntactic proximity here, and their closeness will continue to increase throughout the novel until it reaches a sexually violent climax.

For the time, however, Marcus represses his desire, not taking Olivia out again or even speaking to her, although they continue to sit next to each other in class. Then one day they run into each other on campus. Marcus interrogates her about her sexual past (“Did you ever do that with someone else?”) (65). Olivia says she did it while drunk at an Amherst party, that she was eventually suspended for drinking and spent time in rehab before transferring to Winesburg. Marcus is disturbed by all this, and the conversation ends with harsh words. The next time they have history class together, Olivia sits at the back. Marcus, despite knowing she is bad news, is hooked. He writes her a love letter, reproduced on the page. Olivia writes back, revealing another skeleton in her closet—she once tried to commit suicide by slitting her wrist.

The back-and-forth epistolary structure is interrupted by yet another letter, this one from a third party, Dean Caudwell. Marcus’ roommate troubles have come to the attention of the dean, who requests a meeting. At first Marcus is cowed by the authority figure, but he grows increasingly brazen and agitated as the conversation turns to religion. Looking at his file, Caudwell points out that Marcus neglected to write anything under religious preference, even though he is Jewish (92). Marcus prickles in response to the dean’s questioning because he
already feels boxed-in by one of Winesburg College’s graduation requirements: to attend at least forty non-denominational sermons at the campus chapel. His subversion of this requirement eventually causes his expulsion, but until then he makes it through chapel by singing to himself a stanza from the Chinese national anthem:

Arise, ye who refuse to be bondslaves!  
With our very flesh and blood  
We will build a new Great Wall!  
China’s masses have met the day of danger.  
Indignation fills the hearts of all of our countrymen,  
Arise! Arise! Arise!  
Every heart with one mind,  
Brave the enemy’s gunfire,  
March on! March on! March on! (82)

The title of the novel makes its first appearance here, and Roth drives home the point in the following paragraph when Marcus says that he gives “special emphasis to each of the four syllables that melded together form the noun ‘indignation’” (82). Marcus is indignant about many things—his father’s overprotectiveness, his boorish series of roommates, the fraternities who try to recruit him—but mostly he cannot stand the requirement to attend chapel, which to him represents a “starchy” and “folksy” brand of un-rigorous intellectualism, very much unlike that of his professors back east, who were “sharper and harder and more vital all around” (86). Among them Marcus had never felt “as though there was some old way of life that everyone on the faculty was protecting” (86)
Marcus feels the disgust of the impatient revolutionary who cannot stand the old ways, tradition for tradition’s sake. This feeling of revulsion is dramatized when he becomes sick in the dean’s office and vomits. Soon after, he is hospitalized with a case of appendicitis, and after surgery Olivia reappears to masturbate him in the hospital bed. At the moment of climax she quotes Longfellow (“I shot an arrow in the air / It fell to earth I knew not where”), putting a new spin on a poem devoid of sexual content (130). But her image is apt; by comparing sperm to arrows she blurs the instruments of sex and war.

Again, this likening of war and sex foreshadows the climax of the novel: a panty raid, staple of collegiate fiction since Animal House. The raid begins on a snowy night (too snowy for a swift police response) with a growing sound:

Like the roar of a crowd at a football game after a touchdown’s been scored, except it was unabating. Like the roar of a crowd after a championship’s been won. Like the roar that rises from a victorious nation at the conclusion of a hard-fought war. (202)

This is a war waged by the male students against their female classmates. It is started, innocently enough, by a snowball fight that gets out of hand, until not just snowballs but beer cans are being thrown, and several residence halls worth of “happy, hyperkinetic boys” have emptied into the quad (202). The intra-masculine horseplay becomes bloodsport, but “the sight of their own blood did nothing to dilute their ardor” (203). Just the opposite:

[It] may have even been what provided the jolt to transform them from playful children recklessly delighting in the surprise of an unreasonable snowfall into a whooping army of mutineers urged on by a tiny cadre of seditious upperclassmen to
turn their rambunctious frivolity into stunning mischief and, with an outburst of everything untamed in them (despite regular attendance at chapel), to tumble and roll and skid down the Hill through the deep snow and commence a stupendous night out that nobody of their generation of Winesburgians would ever forget, one christened the next day by the *Winesburg Eagle*, in an emotionally charged editorial expressing the community’s angry disgust, as “the Great White Panty Raid of Winesburg College.” (203)

The panty raid has become cliché, but Roth’s take on it is more sinister than most. The boys are bloody and drunk, overturning tables and breaking glass, and in a move recalling Alexander Portnoy’s sexual rebellion, some of them masturbate into the panties before throwing them to the snow-covered ground. This mass expression of masculine frustration immediately follows Marcus’s personal subversion of the requirement to attend chapel. Marcus’s actions provide no proximate cause for the mass insurrection, but the back to back placement of the two events in the narrative indicates an association. The narrative logic here, as Christopher Hitchens puts it in a highly unfavorable review, is “a relationship between the local and the cosmic, or the local and the global” (Hitchens).

The local conflict is Marcus’s failure to assimilate into a conservative school in small-town, 1950’s America. He is intellectually frustrated, and when his sexual outlet is removed (Olivia disappears, impregnated by someone else), he rebels against the source of his intellectual blockage, the local religious strictures. He pays someone to attend chapel for him, and this individual subversion is immediately followed in the narrative by the snowball fight, a
mock war which grows into the panty raid and the symbolic rape of the women of the college, a truly warlike event perpetrated by a sexually charged, adolescent army. The link between the “Great White Raid” and the global event of the novel, the shooting war in Asia, is made explicit by the president of the college when, the next Sunday, he admonishes the assembled men of Winesburg (appropriately, they gather in the chapel), shaming them for their erotic hijinks by unfavorably comparing them to the deadly seriousness of what is happening overseas. Thus Marcus’s individual rebellion becomes a group uprising, the panty raid, a localized war that becomes analogous to the fighting in Korean. The reason Hitchens doesn’t like the novel is he thinks this relationship is contrived. Certainly the panty-raid is something of a set-piece.

Although President Lentz’s point in comparing Korea and the panty-raid is that the men of Winesburg are nothing like the brave G.I.’s fighting the communists, ironically, the reader is led to believe the reverse. In part this is because of the language Marcus uses to describe the panty raiders (“whooping army of mutineers,” “cadre of seditious upperclassmen,” “a victorious nation at the conclusion of a hard-fought war”). Lentz also uses martial language to describe the male students, even though he means to denigrate them:

“Tell me, did you think you were being heroic warriors by storming our women’s dormitories and scaring the coeds there half to death? Did you think you were being heroic warriors by breaking into the privacy of their rooms and laying your hands on their personal belongings? Did you think you were being heroic warriors by taking and destroying possessions that were not your own? And those of you who cheered them on, who did not raise a finger
to stop them, who exulted in their manly courage, what about your manly courage?” (219)

Although Lentz means to say that warriors filled with “manly courage” never terrify women or destroy property, a quick scan of the day’s headlines reveals the opposite. The spontaneous panty raid dramatizes the rapacious instincts behind warfare, and President Lentz’ speech uses shame and fear to repress this brutality. Ironically, Lentz shames the panty-raiders by saying they are least like soldiers, the people to whom they are actually most similar, at least according to the language used in the novel. Lentz’s phrases like “breaking into the privacy of their rooms,” “taking and destroying possessions,” and “storming our women’s dormitories,” take on a meaning different than he intends in light of the knowledge of what warfare really is. We don’t think of our heroes as raping and pillaging, but which modern nation does? If heroes never rape, steal, or kill innocents, there are a lot of unheroic people fighting in the world’s wars.

All the events up to President Lentz’s speech, the first 224 pages of the novel, are narrated by Marcus and form the first chapter, “Under Morphine.” The second, “Out from Under,” begins when Marcus is injected with morphine after being mortally wounded. At this point his memory ceases, and since memory is all he has, a third-person narrator must step in. The switch in point of view and the ironically reversed chapter titles showcase Marcus’s fallibility; it is only when he is under morphine and someone else takes over telling his story that we can begin to come “out from under” his cloudy perspective and make some sense of what his life means.
In the second chapter Marcus is held up as a counter example, his life a cautionary tale against trying to buck the system. He dies in this chapter, and after receiving news of his son’s death his father dies too. His mother, although she survives to be a hundred, lives a “ruined” life (229). The narrator sarcastically laments that “if only” Marcus hadn’t done this, or “if only this and only that, we’d all be together and alive forever and everything would work out fine” (229). The final words of the chapter highlight what Marcus failed to learn, what we are presumably supposed to learn from him, the lesson “his uneducated father had been trying so hard to teach him all along: of the terrible, the incomprehensible way one’s most banal, incidental, even comical choices achieve the most disproportionate result” (231).

The pace of the narrative increases greatly as we receive the knowledge of what Marcus’s life means. The final two chapters are nine pages combined, and most of the narration is in summary. The effect is a rush of information, a fast zooming-out from the microcosm (Marcus’s local view) to the macrocosm (the third-person narrator’s cosmic perspective). This perspective is widest in the final chapter, the afterword-like “Historical Note.” Like the second chapter, the point of view is third-person, but the tone is more detached, unemotional, the perspective more omniscient:

In 1971, the social upheavals and transformations and protests of the turbulent decade of the 1960s reached even hidebound, apolitical Winesburg, and on the twentieth anniversary of the November blizzard and the White Panty Raid an unforeseen uprising occurred during which the boys occupied the office of the dean of men and the girls the office
of the dean of women, all of them demanding
“student rights.” .... Overnight—and to the horror of
no authorities other than those by then retired from
administering Winesburg’s affairs—the chapel
requirement was abolished along with virtually all
the strictures and parietal rules regulating student
conduct that had been in force there for more than a
hundred years and that were implemented so
faithfully during the tradition-preserving tenure of
President Lentz and Dean Caudwell. (233)

A synchronicity is at work. Twenty years after the “insurrection” of the
panty raid there is another “unforeseen uprising,” but unlike the panty raid, this
new rebellion is organized and has a purpose besides sexual gratification: the
intellectual and sexual liberation of Winesburg College. Rather than the men of
the college assaulting the women in an act of sexual warfare, both sexes fight
side by side for their rights. And the fight is a success—the chapel requirement
that Marcus so hated is now abolished, along with the “parietal” regulations of
sexual conduct. With the benefit of a broader perspective, Marcus’s life now
appears to be less of a failure. He becomes something of a martyr, or at least a
person tragically ahead of his time. His refusal to go to church was twenty years
early, but he has come out on the right side of history. This historical knowledge,
however, is not available to him. It will provide no consolation to someone
trapped in the afterlife of memories that stop when he goes under morphine. All
Marcus knows is that he met a girl in American history class, he fell in love, he
screwed it up, he dies. Marcus, the individual, can never have the benefit of a
macrocosmic perspective like that of “Historical Note.” He is trapped in a
nightmare. Yet the novel does not end with a final reminder of his eternal regret.
His “I” fades under morphine and does not reprise itself. Instead we are left with the sweeping view of history, which seems to contradict everything that comes before it.

For this mixed message *Indignation* is an ambivalent novel, even to the brink of nihilism. On the one hand it depicts the powerlessness of the individual in the face of history: Marcus’s indignation does nothing but get him killed in a war—the “Forgotten War,” no less. On the other hand there is hopefulness in the final chapter’s appeal to history, in its vision of individuals working together to reform a rigid institution. But if we weigh the sheer number of pages Roth devotes to each of these competing ideas, the story of the powerless individual wins out by a huge margin. The brief “Historical Note” reads as hollow in comparison to Marcus’s lengthier tale of woe. The implication is that, while a study of history may point to an upward trajectory for society as a whole—more freedom, less oppression—the study of history is no consolation for individual human suffering in the moment. *Indignation* seems to suggest there is no consolation. Like the forgotten yet never-ending Korean War, Marcus’s suffering goes on unnoticed for all eternity. He is trapped in the timelessness of pure and vivid memory, while the “Historical Note” lasts for two pages and cannot begin, with its cliché language like “turbulent decade,” to convey or console the pathos of napalm, race riots, missile crises and political assassinations.
CONCLUSION

Wielding War

The greatest menace while I was growing up came from abroad, from the Germans and the Japanese, our enemies because we were American. I still remember my terror as a nine-year-old when, running in from playing on the street after school, I saw the banner headline CORREGIDOR FALLS on the evening paper in our doorway and understood that the United States actually could lose the war it had entered only months before.

- The Facts: A Novelist’s Autobiography

To Marcus Messner in Indignation and to the trainees in “The Defender of the Faith,” battle is an unknown quantity, something to be dreaded. The idea of warfare operates for them much as it does for the reader (assuming we aren’t veterans of WWII or Korea), as the conglomeration of everything learned second-hand. These, the closest Roth has written to traditional war stories (martial characters, martial conflict), are ones in which the fighting itself is a far-off thing. Distant, yet imminently real, and both “Defender” and Indignation employ the irony of a war story set far away from the battlefield. In both cases the violence is sublimated into the present conflict. In “Defender” this is between ethnic and individual identity. In Indignation it is a sexual conflict, the tension between repression and aggression.

Marcus comes to know the battlefield first-hand, but is unable to tell us about it. A third person must step in, and this narrator is more interested in the
gore and pain of his death and in giving us lessons about his life choices than in painting a realistic portrayal of life on the front. And among the characters in “Defender,” only Captain Barrett and Marx know battle as lived experience. Barrett never speaks of it outside the abstract (“There’s a war going on”), and Marx is unwilling to give us more than glimpses, shards of memory. He never flashes back to tell us a single war story all the way through. There is no ill-fated mission, no bridge to be blown, no endless series of bombing runs. He never gives us an objective correlative for his experience in Europe. The effect is to keep the World War Two and Holocaust of the story as that which we bring to it: as whatever history we have previously learned.

This is a powerful way to wield wars, especially for a satirist of American culture. It allows Roth to use national conflict as a cultural backdrop or bookmark, a reference point from which to chart the movement of a society in time. By no means is this trope unique to him—we speak of the antebellum South, post-war fiction, the fall of Rome—but Roth uses war as a conflicted backdrop often enough to make it an identifying characteristic of his fiction, of these two cases, and the phenomenon is also clearly evident in the American Trilogy. Each of the three novels involves the tragic fall of a man closely identified with WWII-era striving (two are in fact veterans), and in two cases the force that delivers the coup de gras is spawned by the Vietnam War. *The Human Stain* provides the starkest illustration of this generational conflict when a disturbed Vietnam veteran murders a disgraced World War Two veteran. The
curtain of one era goes up; something darker comes down. The movement Zuckerman charts is a postwar decline.

The American Trilogy is his retelling of the 20th century, an attempt to find meaning in the creation of history. Even if what emerges is tragedy, a rise and fall, there is consolation from knowing the pattern. 

_Indignation_, however, qualifies this consolation: it is not available to the individual living the story, but only to the audience observing him with the benefit of a broader perspective. Even then, the novel suggests that the ability to put a life in its historical context provides no real catharsis. An upward or downward sloping history is an abstract idea, the knowledge of it a hollow victory and no match for the anguish of sex and war in the moment.

_Indignation_ also stands as Roth’s most extended and overt coupling of the sexual and martial. While drawing such a clear-cut connection may be new territory for him, it is not a new trope in literature—one only need recall a thousand ships launched by a beautiful, adulterous face. Neither is this linkage hollow or artificial; the field of evolutionary psychology provides a compelling theoretical framework to explain how sex motivates war, and vice versa. Only time will tell if we can uncouple these two drives and change the course of history for the better. With its competing points of view and synchronous structure, _Indignation_ implies that we will continue repeating ourselves, that we will never gain the correct perspective.

It is no coincidence that Roth’s first and latest works, separated by fifty years, are set during wartime. He was a child during World War Two, came of
age during Korea, and was stirred to harsh satire by Vietnam. With this said, he seldom depicts the physical reality of armed conflict or the psychological state of those presently engaged in it. His life has not included experience in battle (although he was in the U.S. Army for a short time). Unfortunately, the life of the century he writes has been dominated by armed conflict. As a man of these times, concerned with representing them, Roth uses the backdrop of national conflict as a means of accessing history and identity: individual and national.


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