



PROJECT MUSE®

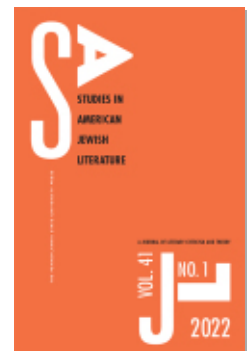
---

“My Father's Face”: Judaism, God, and Ritual Practice In  
Philip Roth’s *Everyman*, *Indignation* , and *Nemesis*

Samuel J. Kessler

Studies in American Jewish Literature, Volume 41, Number 1, 2022, pp. 34-59  
(Article)

Published by Penn State University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/853014>

**“MY FATHER'S FACE”:  
JUDAISM, GOD, AND  
RITUAL PRACTICE  
IN PHILIP ROTH'S  
*EVERYMAN, INDIGNATION,  
AND NEMESIS***

ABSTRACT

This article is about the occurrence and centrality of distinctly Jewish ideas and ritual practices in Philip Roth's *Nemesis* (2010), *Indignation* (2008), and *Everyman* (2006). In these three novels, Roth constructed characters whose existential crises most often come during or when meditating upon moments of Jewish ritual or Jewish theological expression, and what emerges is that the when, where, and how moments in which Roth's protagonists interact with Judaism are particularly Judaic. When they are practicing Jewish ritual or speaking in Jewish terms, Roth's characters end up creating meaning through what Stephen Kepnes calls the great theatrical performance of Judaism.

KEYWORDS: Philip Roth, Judaism, ritual, theology, nemesis tetralogy

The relationship between Philip Roth (1933–2018) and Judaism is a subject fraught with critical tensions (see Aarons 2005 and 2007; Cooper 1996; Steinberg 2005; Grumberg 2009; Kaplan 2015; Maurer 2011; Kremer 2008; O'Donoghue 2010). It is well known that nearly all of Roth's major characters are Jewish, and that, with some important exceptions, his novelistic themes have overwhelmingly been both intertwined with, and representative of, a so-called “Jewish American experience.”<sup>1</sup> From the time of the publication of his earliest stories, scholars, critics, and lay readers have identified Roth as a Jewish writer. And Roth, ever self-reflective,

responded to his heritage with variously provocative, ironic, embracing, and dismissive discussions of Jewish identity and its impact on his writing (see Roth 1961, 1963, 1974, and the extensive discussions of these early writings in Bailey 2021). Indeed, the insights and monologues of Roth's recurring protagonist and narrator Nathan Zuckerman might arguably be called one of the most sophisticated decades-long meditations on the nature of modern Jewishness that American literature has ever produced.

This article foregrounds the occurrences and centrality of distinctly Jewish ideas and ritual practices in *Everyman* (2006), *Indignation* (2008), and *Nemesis* (2010), demonstrating that in three of the final novels of his career, Roth engaged in an extended philosophical musing on the problems and hardships of ending one's life in a world with or without the God of the Jews. I argue that in these works, Roth constructs characters whose existential crises most often arise during or when meditating upon moments of Jewish ritual or Jewish theological expression. As we analyze and unpack these novelistic episodes, what emerges is that the when, where, and how moments in which Roth's protagonists interact with Judaism are particularly Judaic. In other words, when Roth's characters are practicing Jewish rituals, or speaking in Jewish terms, they end up creating meaning through what Steven Kepnes calls the "great theatrical performance" of Judaism (2013, 55), or what Mircea Eliade identifies as "the repetition of paradigmatic gestures" (2005, 35). Many works of Roth criticism place Roth (the writer) in the social realm of American Jewish experience, defining Roth's Judaism (and thus the way critics interpret the Judaism he writes for his characters) as a cultural inheritance devoid of theological content, which in turn can lead to a reading of Roth's literary relationship to religion strictly through humor or irony. But such an elision of Roth with his fiction (especially since his public pronouncement about Judaism and his Jewish context remained so steadfastly the same across the decades) can cause critics to overlook the evolution in tone that takes place within Roth's fiction, especially (if not solely) late in his career. This article, while noting Roth's use of irony as a way of distancing himself from religion, seeks also to show how that irony, but also more importantly the rhetorical modes of lament, sorrow, rage against God, and meditation on history, can be a means of (counterintuitive as it may seem) accentuating the nearness of ritual and religion. When juxtaposed to communal loss and suffering these ritual actions become a force in Roth's novels for what the classical rabbis called *karov*, a cleaving or closeness toward something—even if that something is a God of seeming cruelty, indignity, or permanent absence.

My aim in this article is to show that these three late novels engage with Jewish thought and practice in a subtler and more sophisticated way—indeed, with an empathic openness that undergirds whole narrative structures—than is present in Roth's earlier works. This is not the space to engage in a broad critique

of the different facets of Judaism that appear across Roth's oeuvre, but some brief remarks are necessary. Following Victoria Aarons, it can be argued that Roth's early works "are preoccupied with Jewish identity [. . . and] Roth's characters seize upon Jewish identity with an insistent and obsessive fervor" (2007, 10). But identity, I am arguing, is quite separate from religious ritual and theology. While Roth's earliest writings, up to and including his books that interact with Israel and Israeli Jewishness, are deeply defined by Jewishness as an identity marker, Roth, as Timothy Parrish (2007) notes, is often far more concerned with his identity as an American than with that as a Jew.

That a shift occurred in Roth's orientation toward Judaism as a religious and ritual inheritance is stated baldly in a remarkable scene in *Patrimony* (1991), where Roth reflects on his father's decline and passing. In a conversation between father and son in the middle of the book, Herman, Roth's father, is describing leaving his tefillin (phylacteries) in an empty locker at the local YMHA, stashing them there so as to—why? Roth is not sure exactly. But important for us is how Roth reflects on the fact that his father never appears to have considered leaving the tefillin to him, his son, a custom that is commonplace in Jewish families.

I didn't ask why he hadn't turned them over to me. I didn't ask why, instead of giving back to me all those napkins and tablecloths and place mats, he hadn't given me the tefillin instead. I wouldn't have prayed with them, but I might well have cherished them, especially after his death. But how was he to know that? He probably thought I would have scoffed at the very idea of his handing on his tefillin to me—and forty years earlier he would have been right. (96)

Here we see an early development of a religious pathos—at least in his writing—that I argue Roth narrativized in his three late novels, most distinctly, the idea that ritual objects and the practices they represent (even when not done and not believed in) form a sort of *kiruv*, a joining together of Jewish families across the generations, and between Jewish communities of the past and present.

The point here is that for some writers it *could* have been the tablecloths and napkins that were meaningful (as it is, for example, a desk and its drawers in Nicole Krauss's *Great House* [2010]). But for Roth it is the tefillin that matter and whose loss is noted, these peculiar, awkward artifacts of a religious life of the Jewish past, whose meaning meant nothing to him in his youth but in his middle age (Roth was fifty-eight when *Patrimony* appeared) became something that, suddenly, as if for the first time, he "might well have cherished." What makes this scene in *Patrimony* so interesting, and so important as an early marker for understanding the novels at the center of this article, is that Roth-the-novelist is willing to have his protagonists (be they named Philip Roth or not) be moved

by Jewish rituals and ideas even when he, Roth-the-man, does not hope to be so moved. A disconnect develops (whose hint begins, I'm arguing, in *Patrimony*) between Roth-the-novelist and Roth's characters concerning Jewish religion, one that has previously been unnoticed by Roth critics who see only a continuity in Roth-the-man's relationship to Judaism and Jewishness and thereby overlook the increasingly nuanced ways in which Roth-the-novelist employs Jewish religious themes.

In the one article suggesting a shift in Roth's incorporation of traditional Jewish themes in his fiction after *Patrimony*, Liliana Naydan discusses biblical narratives and theological overtones in *American Pastoral* (1997), arguing that through them Roth is "contemplat[ing] the origins of human suffering and provid[ing] reason to lose faith in God" (2016, 336).<sup>2</sup> In other words, Roth's narrative is being structured along classical theological lines, even while Roth himself maintains his atheistic distance. *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), which immediately preceded *American Pastoral*, seems likewise to mark a shifting tenor in Roth's feelings about engaging with Judaism itself (as opposed to merely its ethnic identity). In one scene, which has the protagonist Mickey Sabbath composing obituaries for himself, alongside those which discuss him as proprietor of the Indecent Theater and "he [who] no have hard prick" there is the final tantalizing line "Mr. Sabbath did nothing for Israel" (191–95). (Arguably, in context "Israel" here refers to the name for the Jewish people and not the modern nation-state, though this uncertainty is likely intentional, considering the strongly felt Zionism prevalent in mid-twentieth-century American Jewry.) Unquestionably, this line can be read as purely comedic, in the way that the mention of Mickey's erect member in an obituary (in an English reminiscent of the grammar of his East European girlfriend) is meant to be. But in the broader context of the novel, both the wording ("did nothing for") and subject ("Israel") are notably serious, or function as simultaneously comedic/serious. And in this way, the phrase "Mr. Sabbath did nothing for Israel" brings the reader up short, and makes this particular version of the obituary feel, strangely, solemn, almost thoughtful, whereas the others feel more or less whimsical (or sad, pathetic, and whimsical, which is the tenor of so much of the novel). Finally, even Mickey's surname, "Sabbath," is a sizable departure for Roth, an invocation of religious, sacred time in the very appellation of his protagonist and in a novel deeply infused with temporal musings and memories.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, we come to find an arc in Roth's deeper engagement with Jewish religious themes, one that begins with *Patrimony* and develops through *Sabbath's Theater* and *American Pastoral* and brings us to the subjects of this article, *Everyman*, *Indignation*, and *Nemesis*. Some of this engagement is witty and some ironic, but some (as Naydan points out and we will see below) is quite serious, a grappling through his fiction with themes that would have been very familiar to Roth's

father during the last years of his life, when, as Roth tells us in *Patrimony*. “Since his retirement [. . .] and particularly in the last decade of my mother’s life, they had begun to attend services together mostly every Friday night, and though he still didn’t go so far as to lay tefillin in the morning, his Judaism was more pointedly focused on the synagogue and the service and the rabbi than it had been at any time since his childhood” (93; cf. *Everyman* 51, discussed below). Even this description demonstrates a close engagement with ritual: to “lay” tefillin is the traditional, religious English phrasing, as opposed to simply saying “wrapping,” which is often written by observers on the outside of the community. In none of these post-*Patrimony* novels do we find—in the novels themselves—the sort of outright dismissal of Jewish tradition that made Roth notorious at the beginning of his career.<sup>4</sup> Instead, and quite decidedly in the other direction, we find a steadily increasing engagement with Jewish religious practices and ideas (without, needless to say, any sort of changing personal belief or action on Roth’s own part), culminating in the three late novels under discussion here.

*Everyman*, *Indignation*, and *Nemesis* are three of Roth’s final five books, and three of the four novels included in the “Nemesis” tetralogy.<sup>5</sup> They were composed over four years and trace a time arc from the Second World War to the mid-2000s. Written in reverse chronological order from their plot settings (*Everyman* is set in the mid-2000s; *Indignation* in the early 1950s; *Nemesis* in the early 1940s), we can understand the books as in fact a unity, a retrospective reconstruction of the world of mid-twentieth-century Jewish family life that slowly reemerges over the three novels, from the lonely unraveling of the protagonist in *Everyman* to the fractured but coherent Jewish nuclear family of *Indignation* to the full and sacrosanct Jewish world of Weequahic in *Nemesis*. (Even the title of the final novel succeeds in feeling ominous and foreboding, even though we know the outcome, almost as if Roth himself is unnerved by the dissolution of this world and its characters.) What we observe across these three works is a narration of Jewish American communal and religious unraveling. Yet undergirding the telling of that tale is a deep and consequential reliance on traditional Jewish tropes (e.g., rituals or laments) that go on creating meaning and assigning moral value (like Herman’s tefillin) even after the larger communal structure in which they were once embedded has fallen away. Characters call upon God even when they profess not to believe in Him. They cite specific ritual actions as part of a moral framework even when the larger cultural embeddedness of those rituals no longer directs their lives. They rail against divine judgment in a world they have always taken to be purely material. What these novels also show us, dovetailing with but also diverging from the narrative of American Jewry, is Roth’s own relationship to Jewishness and Judaism—i.e., to the inheritance of being a Jew versus the world created by and around the religion of the Jews. Almost paradoxically, even against Roth’s insistence that he be considered on his own merits, a writer outside the continuity of Jewishness, his

later works engage more deeply and with greater nuance the world of Judaism and its manifestations than at almost any other time in his career. As mirror opposite of Roth himself, who insisted on a secular burial, shorn of any ritual meaning, his final books require us to read more closely and with a deeper knowledge of Judaism than most of what came before them. In none of Roth's previous novels, up to and including *Sabbath's Theater* and *American Pastoral*, is there such a direct confrontation between a Roth protagonist and a ritual practice or theological idea drawn directly from the heart of Jewish religion. American-Jewish identity dominates Roth's works from *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959) through the *Zuckerman Bound* (1985–1979) novels to *The Plot Against America* (2004); nationalist vs. diaspora politics is central to *The Counterlife* (1986) and *Operation Shylock* (1993); and the male body itself is the subject of the David Kepesh books (1972–2001). But what we see in these three late novels is something distinct, something new, not just a turning to directly face the Judaic elements of Jewish identity but the framing of each novel's narrative such that they hinge on and fundamentally engage with the traditional practices and beliefs of Judaism.

It is important to note briefly that this article will not touch on the fourth book of the Nemesis tetralogy, *The Humbling*. This is for one main reason: it is markedly *not* about Jewish communities, Jewish lives, or Jewish responses to suffering, loss, and redemption. While *The Humbling* is clearly asking many of the same existential questions as its three companion novels (especially about the meaning of life in the face of death), it does so—indeed, does so quite strikingly—outside of the framework of Jewish communal decline and disappearance that provides the undergirding matrix (and therefore the connection with religious history and the genealogy of religious language and questioning) of *Everyman*, *Indignation*, and *Nemesis*. (To some degree, *The Humbling* is almost outside of time, a tale of decline as applicable to the nineteenth century, or indeed to the life of a Sophoclean actor in Athens in the third century BCE, as to twentieth-century America.) Simon Axler's is a story of loneliness and absence, of the vacuum created at the end of a life whose purpose has been for singular pleasures and communal adoration. “[Axler] screamed aloud when he awakened in the night and found himself still locked inside the role of the man deprived of himself, his talent, and his place in the world, a loathsome man who was nothing more than the inventory of his defects (6). “After what must have been an hour, he decided not to be found dead in Pegeen's room, in Pegeen's chair. The failures were his, as was the bewildering biography on which he was impaled” (138). Axler begins as himself and is defeated as himself. He is so much alone in his individuality that he will not even allow himself to die in his ex-lover's chair. As we will see in the pages below, the loud screams that echo through Roth's three other Nemeses novels resound far outside of the individual characters who voice them: toward the cruelties of God; against the fragmentation of community; into an unseeing sky; and down into the

darkness of a father's grave. If one were so inclined, one could read *The Humbling* as Roth's attempt to see what might happen to a character who confronts the same crises of mortality but in a purely secular context. *The Humbling* is a novel of deep existential exploration and personal suffering, but it is not a "Jewish" novel in the way that I am defining such works in these pages. I have therefore left it out of the following discussion.

#### **EVERYMAN: CONFRONTATION WITH JUDGMENT**

*Everyman* traces one man's life through lovers, medical conditions, and physical decline. Like its early modern namesake, the morality play "The Summoning of Everyman," the title suggests universality, or at least commonality—that a life can be measured from beginning to end through its material conditions. And like the early modern play, it gives an accounting of a single life in such a way as to show the universal stakes that underpin every action—the personal consequences, the ethical gambles—that ripple out from every choice. But unlike "The Summoning of Everyman," which seeks a sort of Christian acceptance of God's benevolent but firm judgment, Roth's novel appears to rest on a deeply anti-metaphysical foundation. What we create in this world, Roth seems to be saying, is the entirety of who we are and how we will be remembered.

Yet while the novel may overtly espouse a traditional brand of existential materialism, this does not preclude Roth from having the work's unnamed protagonist engage in a series of Jewish ritual expressions and actions, questioning the limits of his own materialist ethic and finding that, as he faces mortality, the commitments he has long held to a Godless world seem just a little less convincing than they had before.

In the years before he died, *Everyman's* father renewed his relationship with the Jewish customs and traditions he had abandoned as a child.

His father had become religious in the last ten years of his life and, after having retired and having lost his wife, had taken to going to the synagogue at least once a day. Long before his final illness, he'd asked his rabbi to conduct his burial service entirely in Hebrew, as though Hebrew were the strongest answer that could be accorded death. (51)

Returning to traditional religion is not unusual late in life. In this way, *Everyman's* father is clearly parallel to Roth's own father (cf. *Patrimony* 93, discussed above). Death can make one existentially anxious, as philosophically defined in Pascal's Wager: we lose little now believing in God, but perhaps everything eternally if we do not. So *Everyman's* father returns to the synagogue. But his son



merely comments, perhaps even ruefully, on this late-in-life return. To a materialist and individualist like Everyman, his father's Judaism bears little weight. Can Hebrew really be the answer to death? Death is so deep, so universally true, while Hebrew and Jewish rituals and men called rabbis are merely creaturely comforts, splints propping together actual broken bones.

The irony here should not be lost on readers, nor should readers be led to thinking that *because* Roth demonstrates a keener empathy and inclusion of Jewish ritual in his late fiction, that he himself became some sort of believing Jew. Quite the contrary, it would seem, from the fact that Roth requested that his own funeral, held at Bard College Cemetery in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, be entirely free of Jewish rituals, imagery, or texts. And even in *Sabbath's Theater*, which began Roth's turn toward an empathic, theologically engaged employment of Jewish ritual tropes, Mickey Sabbath imagines the writing on his tombstone as lascivious as ever: "Beloved Whoremonger, Seducer, Sodomist, Abuser of Women, Destroyer of Morals, Ensnarer of Youth, Uxoricide, Suicide" (376). No sentimental religion here. Or maybe? For when visiting his family's graves, "Sabbath found pebbles to place on the stones of his mother, his father, and Morty. And one for Ida. Here I am" (370). Even Mickey Sabbath cannot contain the urge to follow in this little Jewish tradition, or to think the famous words, uttered by Jews all the way back to Abraham: Here I am.<sup>6</sup>

Such an individualist view of religion on the part of Everyman, however, is not compatible with the traditional Judaism his father has begun to practice. As Robert Alter notes (in a discussion of how Jewish novelists face the darkness of their historical moment): "The possession of a past [. . .] is a necessary condition for the imagining of the future; the vaster and more varied the past, the richer the possibilities of the future will be" (1978, 9). That Everyman's father has returned to Judaic practice necessarily means that some part of the future will have to contend with Judaism. What sort of Judaism? Roth's narrative supplies the answer: the Jewish funeral. Everyman's father forces on his children (Everyman has a brother) the physicality of Jewish burial practices. Had the father not returned to Judaism, perhaps he could have been cremated. Or perhaps his burial could have been simply the lowering of the casket into the ground. But Jewish law forbids cremation, just as it requires the family to throw the first soil over the casket, to bury the dead themselves. Synagogue and Hebrew prayers are the prerequisites for the father to guarantee he has a Jewish funeral. The funeral itself, however, is the way the father guarantees that he can confront Everyman with the existential truth of their shared Jewish past.

Again, the parallels between what Roth writes of Everyman and what Roth recounts of his own father's late-in-life reengagement with religion beg deeper examination. But here, note just this one point: that as Roth himself, in *Patri-mony*, must confront the missing tefillin, as well as speak with the rabbi and the

synagogue community to which his father had become a part, in both narratives it is a father's choices that are the impetus for contact with Jewish ritual. And in both, it leaves the character (Roth the narrator of *Patrimony*; Everyman as Roth depicts him) reeling, calling on memories and emotions long suppressed, or compelling thought on a subject never previously considered in any detail.

But at the funeral, Everyman is recovering from surgery. He does not have the strength to throw dirt on the casket. He must watch the others. This leads to a harrowing experience for Everyman:

The best he could do to be as immersed in the burial's brutal directness as his brother, his sons, and his nephews was to stand at the edge of the grave and watch as the dirt encased the coffin. He watched till it reached the lid, which was decorated only with a carving of the Star of David, and then he watched as it began to cover the lid. His father was going to lie not only in the coffin but under the weight of that dirt, and all at once he saw his father's mouth as if there were no coffin, as if the dirt they were throwing into the grave was being deposited straight down on him, filling up his mouth, blinding his eyes, clogging his nostrils, and closing off his ears. He wanted to tell them to stop, to command them to go no further—he did not want them to cover his father's face and block the passages through which he sucked in life. I've been looking at that face since I was born—stop burying my father's face! (59–60)

The shoveling of earth; the covering of the Star of David; the ritual's recognition of finitude within the eternal; the desire to cry out against the necessary for the sake of the desired impossibility—these are what strike us as Everyman stands at his father's grave. In a way, the funeral is his father's final teaching. He has given Everyman a symbol from the past, and through it, as Alter notes, Everyman must imagine a future. A future without his father. A future where suddenly the past is closed off to him, without his father's voice, his father's memories, his father's kindness. He “wanted to tell them to stop,” but he could not: it is not allowed. The brutal truth of the ritual forces Everyman to watch his father's casket be covered with soil, and his honor toward his father, and his father's wishes for a Jewish burial, are the very causes of this pain. It is as if from the grave Everyman's father is using Jewish ritual to force on his son a materialist realization: the love of a son for his father. The realization is neither uniquely profound nor distinctly Jewish. But that is not necessarily the purpose of every religious act. Humans need a way to arrive at even basic moral realizations. Everyman's father is using Judaism to do that for his son. And it works.

We can also phrase Everyman's graveside experience another way: the power of a father's burial is dependent upon his son's relation to the physical vestiges of archaic ritual, fluctuating and changing with it, and the ritual is at bottom

nothing more than the whispered remembrance, above the deafening cry of materialist individualism, of patrimonial obligation and communal responsibility. As Gershom Scholem wrote in 1930: “The divinity, banished from man by psychology and from the world by sociology, no longer wanting to reside in the heavens, had handed over the throne of justice to dialectical materialism and the seat of mercy to psychoanalysis and had withdrawn to some hidden place and does not disclose Himself. Is He truly undisclosed? Perhaps this last withdrawal is His revelation” (quoted in Mendes-Flohr 1984, 27–28). The funeral is the ritualized reminder that nothing in the physical world, no matter how exalted, is eternal. It is a last withdrawal. It might be easy to think that after the first reminder of finitude humans would cease to search for the transcendental. Watching the casket of his father vanish beneath the dirt Everyman should be comforted in the silence, in the emptiness, finding that his own life is what substitutes for that of his father’s. But the ritual of burying the father creates a moment in which the life of the father seems real once again. Even in death the father is not yet gone. It is in the reaching for that memory, which in the act of burial is made tactile, that Everyman cries out for his father’s living face. Scholem’s “withdrawal as revelation” is another way of saying that Everyman has a *will to life* starkly opposed to the truth of finite materiality. Roth writes: “But then it’s the commonness that’s most wrenching, the registering once more of the fact of death that overwhelms everything” (2006, 15). Read not “commonness” but “recurrence,” or indeed, “once-moreness,” since that which is overwhelming is the fact of death’s entry into our lives “once more”—death’s recurrence, once more. So it’s the recurrence that’s most wrenching, the eternal arising from within the mundane, the act of ritual pointing not toward the self but outward, at the world, at the communal, the shared within the personal. “There is [. . .] the eternal repetition, the eternal restoration of the original,” said Walter Benjamin (2007, 204), seeking to put into words the life that so obviously remains of the people and memories that are dead or gone.

Restorations, though, can be hard to recognize for those who reject their possibility. Reflecting at his father’s graveside, Roth recounts Everyman’s dismissal of religious explanation. “No hocus-pocus about death and God or obsolete fantasies of heaven for him. There was only our bodies, born to live and die on terms decided by the bodies that had lived and died before us” (51). Yet when we read back twenty pages we encounter quite a different sentiment. Staring out at the vastness of the sea, recognizing the distance as only a finite part of something more, Everyman places peculiar import on his own existence. He was, Roth writes, “convinced of his right, as an average human being, to be pardoned ultimately for whatever deprivations he may have inflicted upon his innocent children in order not to live deranged half the time” (32). How differently this sounds from the sentiment “born to live and die on terms decided by the bodies that had lived and died before us.” To be “pardoned ultimately—”by whom?

In what superior court does one's actions matter? Perhaps *Everyman* is referring merely to a pardon from his children. But then the grammar of the sentence makes little sense. Why refer to them in the third person when it is from them he is asking pardon? And further, it cannot be a pardon from his children because such a pardon need not be ultimate—it need only conform to his later edict of “terms decided by the bodies that had lived and died before us.” No, *Everyman* is reaching for something more, grasping beyond the material. Is it obviously a Jewish grasping? Not necessarily. But it is certainly more than a materialist one, and, as we learned from the experience at his father's grave, in *Everyman's* life it is Jewish rituals that prove powerful enough to wretch him from his individualist complacency.

This all does matter, profoundly, precisely because it enables the reader to include *Everyman* among the characters in generations of Jewish stories who trembled in prayer before their God. S. Y. Agnon wrote: “let no man be skeptical; for indeed we have the promise from the mouth of the Holy One, blessed be he, himself, that he will bring and hasten redemption when people [repent] and leave off their evil deeds” (1987, 27–28). Through Agnon we understand *Everyman* by the sea, with his impossible and self-doubting contemplations of infinity. If life is only body, if life is only life and nothing more, why should we care about infinity? Because when infinity is mediated in ritual, in prayer or in dirt, then *Everyman* can be drawn back into it. Benjamin would say that there is only the eternal repetition of the attempted restoration. But with Judaism this cycle is inescapable. Eternal repetition is the lifeblood of the Jewish people, the return, time and again, to the renewal of life, generation upon generation: “Not with our fathers did the LORD seal this covenant but with us—we who are here today, all of us alive” (Deut. 5:3); “And you shall rehearse them to your sons” (Deut. 6:7); “And not with you alone do I seal this covenant and this oath but with him who is here standing with us this day before the LORD our God and with him who is not here with us this day” (Deut. 29:13–14).

Roth's depiction of *Everyman's* confrontations with Judaism's rituals weaves *Everyman's* story into that of the Jewish people themselves, who consistently do not believe in the efficacy of their God, and so must reenact their belief daily, all the years of their lives. Kepnes writes that “[Jewish ritual] is then something like a great theatrical performance in which each person has a part to play, a contribution to make to the creation of a world of [divine presence]. Seeing [Jewish ritual] as a performance allows us to understand that holiness is found in a series of coordinated social actions [ . . . ] to understand that holiness itself is a communal performance” (2013, 55–56). The recurrence of performance; the doing again of again-ness; a great once-more-ness. Kepnes says that in the classical Jewish imagination there is in actuality the construction of a great play. The assigning of actors to specific roles is not pedantry but inspiration. Jewish ritual action creates

the space wherein the divine manifests Its presence. In assigning his sons their parts at his funeral, Everyman's father is creating his role in the ongoing play of Judaism. And in having him stand at the shore and question his ultimate judge, expecting something but not knowing what, Roth depicts Everyman as adding his voice—and his body—to Jewish ritual as well.

### **INDIGNATION: JEWISHNESS IN FLESH**

Marcus Messner, the narrator-protagonist of *Indignation*, is a Newark Jew who has fled to rural Winesburg, Ohio, to attend college. Many of the most fundamental social barriers are being dismantled in Marcus's time—between city and country, Jew and Gentile, working and middle class. With its reference to Sherwood Anderson's story collection, Roth from the outset places the novel into the genre of stories about small town American life. As is the case with each of Anderson's chapters, Roth's novel is basically a single story, featuring relatively few characters, and offering what appears to be a moral parable without actually clarifying the moral.<sup>7</sup> Set though it might be in the Protestant American Midwest, *Indignation* is also about themes deeply and traditionally Jewish, focused on ancient tribal values inscribed in blood and flesh and renegotiated each new generation. While questions of Jewish identity and ritual do not become apparent until a key (I argue axial) scene late in the novel, once they have been raised they explain important aspects of the earlier narrative.

But before we can discuss that axial scene, or any other portions of the novel, the underlying narrative frame of the book bears brief comment. As we learn on page 225 (of 233), Marcus, the first person-narrator, is dying, lying on a battlefield in far-away Korea, high on morphine, as his comrades, growing fewer by the minute as they too are gunned down, try desperately to save his life. (Marcus appears to believe he is dead [54], and eventually will be, just not until after the narration changes to third-person [225].) The novel we have just read, therefore—the memories of his youth, of his family, of Winesburg College, of his loves and fears—are the thoughts of a man whose life is ebbing away, the balance already tilted in favor of death. He is narrating from a sort of limbo, with a clarity brought about by the combination of mortality and drugs. In this way, Roth has elided a religious frame altogether, depicting Marcus as neither fully alive nor dead, part of an a-theological sphere where there is still enough life not only for the normal functioning of memory and emotion but likewise to stave off the authorial need to assert a claim (if Roth has one, which based on his numerous comments and actions, all critics assume he does not) about what happens to a person after death. And, because the novel is narrated from the point just before death, at the same existential cliff we came to see so crisply narrated in *Everyman* (discussed above),

*Indignation* more clearly becomes a late-in-life novel, focused retrospectively on what one did and how one acted and the choices one made along the way in this mortal world.

Which returns us to the aspects of the text that revolve around Jewish ritual practice, especially a scene that begins three quarters of the way through the novel. In a conversation between Marcus and his mother, she expresses her discomfort with a few of the choices he has made during his first semester in Ohio, especially his selection of girlfriend. Prior to this conversation, Marcus, we learn, has fallen in love with a young woman, Olivia Hutton, whose emotional instability once led to an attempted suicide. His mother, hoping to persuade him to forget Olivia and find a different girlfriend, says:

The world is full of young women [. . .] They exist by the millions. Find one of *them*. She can be a Gentile, she can be anything. This is 1951. You don't live in the old world of my parents and their parents and their parents before them. Why should you? That old world is far, far away and everything in it long gone. All that is left is the kosher meat. That's enough. That suffices. It has to. Probably it should. All the rest can go. (172, italics original.)

On its face, these words appear to be asking a question about Jewish culture in the most abstract sense. When she speaks of “the old world” she means men in black hats and prayer shawls, and women who work in the kitchen baking chicken and potatoes and having children. She means living together on cramped inner-city streets and not going to summer camp or college or the cinema. And the kosher meat? Perhaps it is only that Marcus's father is a kosher butcher and she is protecting her family's livelihood. Indeed, following this line of reasoning, we could interpret the laws of kosher slaughter as simply about Jewish culture, about some shared experience among Jews, where meaning arises only from the differentiation of Jew from non-Jew. What that difference entails is irrelevant. The law could be this or that so long as there is a law.

Read another way, however, and this interpretation does not help explain, nor does it coincide with, the Jewish symbolism found elsewhere in *Indignation*. The details of kosher slaughter, the entirety of the ritual processes, are themselves essential to the novel's plot. As is, importantly, Marcus's enjoyment, during the months before he leaves for Winesburg, in working in his father's butcher shop, in the connection he makes with the business and, especially, with his father. “I look back at those [. . .] months as a wonderful time—wonderful except when it came to eviscerating chickens. And even that was wonderful in its way, because it was something you did, and did well, that you didn't care to do” (7).<sup>8</sup> Marcus's family butcher shop in Newark is part of a centuries-old tradition, catering to the unique dietary obligations of the Jewish religion. And there are two main aspects of the

process of kosher slaughtering that make this ritual particular and unique, as well as irreplaceable in Roth's narrative. First, the blade that kills the animal must be perfectly smooth. It cannot have any nicks or scratches. Second, the blood must be drained from the animal before it can be processed. "That's what I learned from my father and what I loved learning from him: that you do what you have to do" (5). We know from Roth himself that the particulars of this practice were essential to his writing. In an interview with Robert Siegel on NPR (Roth and Siegel 2008), Roth said that he spent time in kosher slaughterhouses in Brooklyn while writing the novel, learning these very methods. That Marcus's father was a kosher butcher is not a casual narrative device in *Indignation*; it is part of the essential matrix of the Jewish parable of the work.

Still, to fully understand the implication of Marcus's mother's statement, and of the broader metaphor in which ritual kosher slaughter is embedded, we must analyze one additional passage. Slightly earlier in the novel, Marcus makes a peculiar comment about the nature and meaning of Olivia's attempted suicide. Marcus relates:

My point is this, that is what Olivia had tried to do, to kill herself according to kosher specifications by emptying her body of blood. Had she been successful, had she expertly completed the job with a single perfect slice of the blade, she would have rendered herself kosher in accordance with rabbinical law. Olivia's telltale scar came from attempting to perform her own ritual slaughter. (161)

Notice how both aspects of kosher meat are mentioned in this passage: the clean slice of the blade and the draining of the blood. In a way, we could say that Marcus is in love with a Christian who has a deeply Jewish intuition (as he tells it, anyway), enacting upon herself the very religious practice that Marcus's own mother thinks is the last remaining element of Jewish communal identity. Olivia had "rendered herself kosher" via the one vestige of Jewish communal life that Marcus's mother thinks should be maintained—kosher meat laws.

But of course, this is not just ironic but outrageous: a human can never be made kosher, let alone be consumed! Yet such a reading is mistaken literalism, failing to understand the connection between these two passages, that of Marcus describing Olivia's attempted suicide through ritual slaughter and that of Marcus's mother coming to visit him and claiming that the only element left of Jewish ritual life is kosher meat. In a perversion of the tradition, Olivia is enacting upon herself the one recognizable Jewish act left in the Messner family, ritual slaughter. Prayer, holidays, Hebrew—these are all gone. Should one wish, there would be nothing left for someone to do who was looking to convert. Except the act of making kosher meat. Which is how Marcus interprets her action. Olivia is making herself

into a Jew, following all the rabbinic ordinances, except instead of converting, or instead of adopting the practice of eating kosher meat, she brings the ritual to her own body, which is itself a very religious act, the carving of flesh for the sake of one's people. Though in this instance a heinous and horrific perversion of a millennia-old ritual, it is all that remains of traditional Judaism for Marcus, and so that is what he sees wrought upon Olivia's arm.

Maggie McKinley (2014) comes to some very different conclusions about the use of ritual slaughter in *Indignation*. "Marcus," she writes, "problematically extends his knowledge of Jewish kosher ritual to a variety of phenomena. This process [. . .] allows Marcus to draw from an existing ritual knowledge base to fashion new but seemingly familiar ritual like activities" (188). McKinley goes on to argue that such a "traditionalization" of kosher slaughter (which for her, following Catherine Bell, means "the act of attempting a 'near perfect repetition' of a particular traditional ritual in a new setting") aids Marcus in his attempt to understand the secular/Christian ethos of Winesburg College with which he is unfamiliar. In McKinley's reading of the novel, such "traditionalization" is a problem because it can "distort the meaning of the original (in this case, religious) ritual as it creates a new ritual, to the extent that the value and purpose of the religious ritual does not transfer to the constructed ritual-like activity" (189). McKinley's theorization of ritual in *Indignation* is deeply insightful, but what McKinley reads as a problematic imposition of a new ritual-like action built off of kosher slaughter—a "traditionalization"—I understand to be a version of ritual continuity, a peculiar and rather contorted continuity, to be sure, one made grotesque in its application outside the traditional frame, but one that nonetheless is not *mediating* for Marcus his place in a secular/Christian milieu but rather one that is *refracting* that milieu into something familiar via the last remaining vestige of Judaic communal structure that his family has retained. In McKinley's framework, "Marcus's distortion[s] of ritual [. . .] often profane both the sacred value of the kosher ritual that serves as a model, as well as the newly fashioned ritualized activity on which he attempts to impose this sacred meaning" (189). This might very well be so if Marcus were engaged in the sort of ritual creation to which McKinley credits him. But that is not necessarily the case, for instead of interpreting Marcus's actions as evidence of ritual *creation*, one can read them instead as moments of interpretive continuity, wherein vestiges of a formerly "whole" or "authentic" past are recuperated or discovered within a fractured contemporary existence.

Such a continuation of a distinctive Jewish practice despite more obvious forms of Jewish communal fragmentation is essential to the Judaic core of the novel. As Roth writes in his background to the Messner's family life, there was "a general postwar decline in the number of families bothering to maintain kosher households and to buy kosher meat and chickens from a rabbinically certified shop whose owner was a member of the Federation of Kosher Butchers of New



Jersey” (2–3). Without searching for Judaism, signs of its traditions appear nonetheless. In falling in love with Olivia, Marcus does not throw himself into her world, does not assimilate, does not act like one of the boys from her small town. He does not parody her life of church-going Midwestern Protestantism. Rather, Marcus reimagines Olivia within *his* world, transforming her into a member of his (fragmenting but still identifiable) community through a Jewish ritual (one of the last remaining), rather than himself into a Christian through one of her own family’s rituals. (Had Roth desired for Marcus to imagine making himself part of the Christian community, a similar ritual of blood and transformation would not be hard to imagine.) Olivia’s attempted suicide is to Marcus a Jewish act, through which she can find a place in his Jewish architecture of being. Marcus comes to comprehend Olivia’s traumatic life through the lens of a unique Jewish ritual, one that is followed not because Jewish tradition has deemed it a command by God from Sinai, but because it is the Jewish communal vision of a certain type of life on Earth. As if from whole cloth it spins particularity. Ritual safeguards identity during times when that identity might be impossible to explain or define in any other way. It is why Marcus’s mother holds onto it. It is why Marcus himself uses it to understand Olivia, her plight and sorrows, and his love for her. And it is why this novel, though written before *Nemesis*, so neatly foreshadows that work’s terror of communal fragmentation and its making heroes of those who persevere in their Jewish identities and practices.

### **NEMESIS: AN INIMICAL DIVINITY**

The actions in *Nemesis* take place during the Second World War in Weequahic, New Jersey, a suburb of Newark. As the story begins, we find the Jewish community of Weequahic mostly intact. While none of the characters is particularly religious, their allegiance to fellow Jews still comes before their commitment to other ethnic groups, a hierarchy that is sublimated in times of peace and plenty but starkly apparent when hard decisions are at hand. The parents in the story are primarily the children of immigrants, so while there is no firsthand memory of the Old Country there is still a sense of duty and belonging, first to one another, then to the United States (epitomized by Franklin Roosevelt). It matters in a Jewish way—that is, for the Jewish communal body, what Michael Wyschogrod (1983) called “corporeal election”—when polio begins to spread from the other neighborhoods into Weequahic, a primarily Jewish enclave. Fighting polio becomes a Jewish problem; keeping the Jewish children safe becomes a Jewish communal obligation. When Jewish children die they are mourned not only as children but also as Jewish children. (A number of critical analyses of *Nemesis* have noted the overt parallel between polio and anti-Semitism; see Kaminsky 2014 and Aarons 2013.)

The narrator of *Nemesis*, Arnie Mesnikoff, was one of the Jewish children stricken by polio during the summer described in the novel. Years later, Arnie focuses his memories on Bucky Cantor, a star athlete and supervisor of the schoolyard. Eventually, Bucky, too, comes down with polio, robbing him of his ability to play sports. After a number of decades have passed, Arnie, who has overcome the debilitations of the disease and has a family and career, meets Bucky to talk with him about that time of fear. To Arnie's great surprise, Bucky remains upset with his lot, having been deprived by polio of the life for which he had hoped. Describing Bucky's attitude, Arnie says (note the italics, which are original):

Did he mean perhaps that it was a *theological* enigma? [. . .] The divine as inimical to our being here? Admittedly, the evidence he could cull from his experience was not negligible [. . .] Bucky's conception of God, as I thought I understood it, was of an omnipotent being whose nature and purpose was to be adduced not from doubtful biblical evidence but from irrefutable historical proof, gleaned during a lifetime passed on this planet in the middle of the twentieth century. (264)

As Arnie explains it, Bucky has taken his bout with polio, as well as all the other disappointments of his life, and turned them on the heavens. Bucky sees not a God of benevolence but a brooding force bent on human misery.

If Bucky now believes that "the divine [is] inimical to our being here," then he must also have assumed, at some earlier point in his life, that the purpose of God, or of any sort of divinity, was in fact to cultivate human life, or at the very least to be salutary toward humanity. Rage at the heavens, or even an enduring, brooding disappointment in the apparent apathy of God toward human suffering, presupposes an expectation of divine goodness. One might say that there is a Job-like quality to Bucky, a rage against a God who provides life but has not the decency to make that life good. (Naydan [2016] finds deep Jobian influences in an earlier Roth novel, *American Pastoral*.) "Why give light to the wretched and life to the deeply embittered, who wait for death in vain, dig for it more than for treasure" (Job 3:20–21). Yet more than Job, whose virtue and faith in God survive the tests to which he is subjected, the tradition of Jewish lamentation (as opposed to Job's demands for justice, for we have no indication that Job understands God to be, at base, good or loving, but he does consider God to be just) is closer to Bucky's own condition. How could the God of Creation be so cruel to his creations? Cries the psalmist: "Why do You stand far off, O LORD, turn away in times of distress?" (Ps. 10:1). The tradition of lament sees a world that is permanently broken, a God beyond reach whose promises are righteous but whose adherents suffer at the hands of whim and will. "[Bucky's] conception of God was of an omnipotent

being who was a union not of three persons in one Godhead, as in Christianity, but of two—a sick fuck and an evil genius” (264–65). Bucky’s rage is the reading—with ironic upturned sneer—of the plain meaning of the Book of Lamentations (traditionally attributed to the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah): “See, God, my misery, how the enemy jeers; the foe has laid hands on everything dear to me [. . . but] God is my portion, I say with full heart, therefore will I hope in him [. . .] See, O LORD, my affliction, for the enemy is boasting. The foe has laid his hand on all her treasures [. . . but] ‘My portion is the LORD,’ I said. Therefore I yet hope for Him” (Lam. 1:9–10, 3:24). What sort of God destroys a man’s life and then seeks to remain his last and final hope? “[A]s for Bucky’s rebellion against Him, it struck me as absurd simply because there was no need for it” (265). It is Bucky’s cruel fate—just as it has always been the Jews’ fate before him—to be forced to cleave (*karov*) to just such an absurd, perhaps heartless, God.

Then there is the second part of Bucky’s cosmology, that it is not just the Bible but history itself that demonstrates God’s contempt for God’s creations, God’s taunting the living with the promise of goodness and the wrath of betrayal. It is not scripture that tells us what the world is like, but it is what happens to those who read that scripture, how the God of the Jewish past reacts (or does not react) to the physical world of human suffering now, today. Writes Jonathan Sacks, commenting on Jeremiah:

a unique configuration of ideas made Jeremiah’s vision possible. The first idea was monotheism. If God was everywhere, then He could be accessed anywhere, even by the waters of Babylon [in exile, outside the Promised Land]. The second was belief in the sovereignty of the God of history over all other powers. Until then, if a people were conquered, it meant the defeat of a nation and its god. For the first time, in Jeremiah’s telling of the Babylonian conquest of Israel, the defeat of a nation is understood as being accomplished *by* its God. [That is, God made—was responsible for—the Jews’ suffering.] God was still supreme. Babylon was merely the instrument of its wrath. (2014)

We see in Sacks’s description a genealogy for the origins of Bucky’s lament against the God of history. In Judaism, as in Bucky’s rage, God, history, suffering, and redemption are all bound up together. These are the tenets against which Bucky contends: the world consists of a singular God whose rule one can rely upon; God is responsible for the fate of God’s people; God, not some Being outside of God, orchestrates the pain and suffering felt by God’s creations; and the message of history contains meaningful theological truth. For Bucky, as for all the Jews in his community in 1940s Weequahic, his initial expectation was that this God of History was supposed to have a thumb on the scale for the Jewish people, to be on their side. Bucky, living in the 1930s and 1940s, certainly had

many reasons to think that God had turned His back on His people. Why add polio to haunt this Jewish neighborhood when, across the ocean, the Germans were already succeeding in destroying Jewish life so well?

In Bucky's conception, the demonstration of God's power lay in the hostility and violence of history. As Aarons writes, "[*Nemesis*], in reaching back in history, expands the threat of reiterative calamity" (2013, 56). And fear of such "reiterative calamity" is a perfectly appropriate response, for what is the Bible if not a centuries-long narration of God's historic actions and the sometimes redemptive, more often tragic, events that follow? Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, in his seminal meditation on meaning and history in Judaism, wrote: "No more dramatic evidence is needed for the dominant place of history in [. . . Judaism] than the overriding fact that even God is known only insofar as he revealed himself 'historically'" (1996, 9). To Bucky, the great "theological enigma" was why God is so deeply tied up with history, why God cannot simply overcome history. But it is not only that God cannot overcome history, it is, as Yerushalmi and Sacks—and Jeremiah long before them—argued, that in Judaism God's very nature is revealed through history, that God is inextricably tied up with history, that to understand God you must live inside history. So Bucky, taking seriously this Jewish demand that God be understood through the actions of history, comes to a Jewish—albeit nontraditional (but importantly, not heretical)—position, that "the divine [is] inimical to our being here" and probably "a sick fuck and an evil genius." The author of Psalm 88 thought much the same things: "Your wrath lay hard upon me, and all Your breakers you inflicted [. . .] You distanced my friends from me, You made me disgusting to them; imprisoned, I cannot get out" (8–9). You, God, have done this to me. The psalmist is adducing from that which has happened to him an image of the nature and being of God, which is exactly what Bucky is doing, and they are coming to near similar places: that God exists, that what happens to people is a reflection of God's nature, and that God is deeply cruel.

Where Arnie and Bucky diverge is in how they reconcile (or not) with their anger at God. Arnie's answer, though it allows him the freedom to have a family and a life after polio, is the non-religious answer: he simply forgets God, whose loyalty is not worth the price of His brutality. Arnie speaks for the assimilated Jew, the secular Jew, the "modern" Jew, for whom the answer to an inimical deity is apathy. Bucky's, however, is, to a partial extent, the Jewish answer, recorded in Job, Psalms, and Jeremiah: rage against one's creator. Quoting Aarons again, Bucky, "still mired in the fiction of the covenant and the collateral of reason [. . .] will align himself with God" (2013, 62). But to call it "the fiction of the covenant" is perhaps precisely backward. It is actually through the fact that Bucky clings to the memory and promise of the covenant that his response enters the realm of Judaism, that make his words of rage a part of the tradition of Jewish lament and anger. The covenant is the age-old promise that God will hear the plea of the suffering

Jews and come to their salvation: “and the Israelites groaned from the bondage and cried out, and their plea from the bondage went up to God. And God heard their moaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God saw the Israelites, and God knew” (Exod. 2:23–25). It is the tradition of the famed Hasidic rebbe, Levi-Yitzhak of Berdichev, who was known to bargain with God: “Once he remained standing at his pulpit morning till night without moving his lips. Earlier he had issued a warning to God: ‘If you refuse to answer our prayers, I shall refuse to go on saying them’” (Wiesel 1972, 108). Bucky is cursing the same disasters as the biblical and Hasidic authors before him. Wails the prophet, “The Master has spurned all my champions in my midst, has proclaimed an appointed time against me to break my young men” (Lam. 1:15), and cries Bucky, “But how can a Jew pray to a god who has put a curse like this on a neighborhood of thousands and thousands of Jews?” (171).

Yet Bucky, in the end and perhaps to his ultimate loss, removes himself from the Jewish tradition of righteous anger at a benevolent Creator, losing the hope that is—alongside the lament—enshrined in Judaism. Bucky, resentful of the “exile” (i.e., the crippling by polio; the breakup of the Jewish Weequahic neighborhood) that God has imposed on him, is incapable of hearing the songs composed on foreign soil, where even in hardship there is hope. “And recall your Creator in the days of your prime, until the days of evil come, and the years arrive, when you will say, ‘I have no delight in them’” (Eccles. 12:1). The point, say Sacks, the Berdichever Rebbe, and the host of biblical writers, is that if you know God is responsible for the exile you must also praise God when that exile finally comes to an end. Bucky, physically wounded, rejecting the offer of marriage that would have kept him moored inside his community (262), never finds his way back home.

Importantly, I would argue that through the characters of Bucky and Arnie, Roth is critiquing not just Bucky’s form of perpetual resentment, and of lives lived in its shadow, but also those who choose to forgo the theological struggle altogether, who separate themselves from the historical community of a people in continual dialogue with their God. Arnie, the emblem of atheism (or more so, apathy), has made his peace with life (life after polio; life after the Jewish neighborhood) and forgotten God (as Arnie had said: “Bucky’s rebellion against Him [. . .] struck me as absurd simply because there was no need for it” [265]). But Arnie is not portrayed as a hero for voicing this sentiment. In ceasing to theologize human suffering, Roth does not portray Arnie as complicating narratives, or arguing with history or justice or the beliefs that bind communities together. Instead, Arnie is depicted as merely an observer, a never fully formed character, a man never caught up in the very real struggles and pathos of what it means to be a Jew in the twentieth century. Roth writes Arnie saying as much about himself: “Bucky’s conception of God [. . .] was to be adduced [. . .] from

irrefutable historical proof, gleaned during a lifetime passed on this planet in the middle of the twentieth century” (264). But Arnie also passes his life in the middle of the twentieth century! Yet his affect is depicted as merely anthropological, even antiseptic: these traumas are Bucky’s, not his, the struggles of someone still part of the ancient heritage but not those of someone who has given up on all that, has removed himself utterly from the community and its moral and theological despair.

Yet Bucky, whose character remains within the Jewish fold and because of that has been mad at God his entire life, who has seen in the heavens a dark force of cruelty, likewise is not portrayed at the novel’s end as a hero. He is not a theological crusader (such as Job or Jeremiah might be called), not a man who saw God’s evil and named it. Roth portrays Bucky as pathetic and broken, a lonely soul, whose grandfather briefly appears on the scene to say as much. In something of a foreshadowing of the depiction of Bucky’s attempt and failure to be a man who stands against the belief in an unreliable God, Roth has his grandfather make the most Jewish argument in the novel: the world is harsh, and the measure of a life is in how one takes the brunt and keeps playing the game, how one stays a Jew even when doing so seems far more of a curse than a blessing.

The grandfather, Sam Cantor, had come alone to America in the 1880s as an immigrant child from a Jewish village in Polish Galicia. His fearlessness had been learned in the Newark streets, where his nose had been broken more than once in fights with anti-Semitic gangs. The violent aggression against Jews that was commonplace in the city during his slum boyhood did much to form his view of life and his grandson’s view in turn. He encouraged the grandson to stand up for himself as a man and to stand up for himself as a Jew, and to understand that one’s battles were never over and that, in the relentless skirmish that living is, “when you have to pay the price, you pay it.”(25)

From a boyhood alone, confronted by cruelty in a new homeland that was meant to take him away from the daily brutality of Poland, Bucky’s grandfather comes through it all, still standing on his feet, still a proud Jew. This initial remembrance is related to the reader in the context of Bucky’s first successful attempt to protect the playground from the local Italian gang—a skirmish from which Bucky emerges successful, a nascent hero in the eyes of the schoolyard boys (Arnie among them). But the measurement of a man, says Sam Cantor, is perseverance (“his nose had been broken more than once”; “relentless skirmishes”), not episodic success.

What we see, then, is that at the beginning of the novel, Roth undercuts any attempt to portray Bucky’s lifelong rage against God as heroic. Instead, it comes across merely as petulance, an unwillingness to “pay the price” of living,

and somewhat pitiful in the face of his grandfather's struggles. No doubt, Roth's writing engenders deep empathy in readers toward Bucky's plight, and in so doing indicts as cruel and unjust a God who inflicts such pain. But the foreshadow of Sam Cantor's brief narrative, and the depth to which Bucky falls—from youthful champion to resentful loner—is not held up in the novel as some grand, meaningful struggle against a wrathful deity but merely as the sad languishing of someone who, in the end, couldn't take the punches. Instead, the Jewish community of Weequahic emerges as the subtle hero of the novel. The community perseveres through war and disease. Its children grow up. Polio recedes and America wins the war. It is Sam Cantor's philosophy that Roth ultimately seems to endorse: of a Jewish vision of the hardships of history, a sometimes cruel God, and the importance of noticing redemption when it arrives. Giving up on that, Roth seems to hint in his title, is, far more than polio, the real Nemesis.

Written while Roth was in his seventies, these three late novels are all meditations on death and loss, on how one watches and mourns those who grow sick and die, and on how each of us ourselves face mortality and extinction. This is, of course, the theme of each of the four "Nemesis" novels, as well as of Roth's final Zuckerman tale, *Exit Ghost*. What separates *Everyman*, *Indignation*, and *Nemesis*, however, is the presence of *something* (perhaps not a mitigating factor but maybe a leavening one) that suggests that though every individual will vanish, each of us is likewise connected with something outside ourselves, beyond ourselves, something that can be touched and felt, observed and commentated on. In these novels, and even further back in Roth's writing, that *something* is Jewish ritual and belief: in *Patrimony*, the tefillin; in *Sabbath's Theater*, the stones on the graves and the question of doing enough for Israel; in *American Pastoral*, the biblical narratives; in *Everyman*, the Jewish funeral; in *Indignation*, kosher meat; and in *Nemesis*, the theological tradition of lament and redemption. As Roth writes in *Nemesis*, "He was struck by how lives diverge and by how powerless each of us is up against the force of circumstance. And where does God figure in this? [. . .] For someone who had previously found in diligence and hard work the solution to all his problems, there was now much that was inexplicable to him about why what happens, happens as it does" (154).

Roth's characters question and demand, they worry and argue, they struggle with a lost past yet also seek the future. But the motif of the hidden face of God, so prevalent throughout these novels, is not at all foreign to Judaism: "I shall put you in the cleft of the crag," says God, "and shield you with My palm until I have passed over. And I shall take away My palm and you will see My back, but My face will not be seen" (Exod. 33:22–23). Judaism is built around a hidden face, an invisible, maybe even absent, presence. It is, in many ways, an attempt to reconcile the experience of a present God of history with an absent God of the present. It is said of the Hasidic master Rebbe Pinhas of Koretz, "Often students would turn to him for help in matters of faith. To one he said, 'True, God may be hiding,



but you know it. That ought to be sufficient.’ Did the student suffer less? No, but he suffered differently” (Wiesel 1982, 21). The God of Roth’s novels is not unlike Roth’s father’s tefillin, known to exist but now gone, a link to a past that was as much sentiment as action, yet a sentiment (Roth calls it “predictably maudlin” [1991, 97]) that one suddenly wishes for when standing on the existential edge.

Nothing comparable to these scenes appear in Roth’s pre-1990s writing, before his father’s death, and they become stronger still around the time of the passing of his brother Sandy in 2011. There is no denying that fathers play a key role in both *Everyman* and *Indignation*, as does a grandfather in *Nemesis*. These elder men represent something, one hesitates to say “authentic,” but certainly legitimating, indeed even moral, regarding the nature and meaning of Jewish ritual and theology, a legitimacy that does not exist in the lives of the main protagonists but that, at pivotal moments, precipitates, even mediates, the encounter of those protagonists with thoroughly Jewish themes. The tales of fathers and sons is not unique to Judaism, just as it is not unique to these novels in Roth’s oeuvre. What is quite new is the remarkably nuanced and impactful narrative centrality of Judaic themes and elements in these late works, and the way the father-son dynamic is deeply embedded in Jewish traditions and interpreted through Jewish tropes.

What more can one say about Roth’s theological imagination? Probably not very much. It seems inconceivable (even laughable) to think that Roth kept a private notebook of religious musings. His biography, now that it has appeared (Bailey 2021), reveals no hidden spirituality. Roth was not interested in claiming knowledge about transcendental truths or divine beings, or in engaging with some of the intricate and particular issues relevant to Jewish belief and practice. But simply through careful reading one can see that something changed, something opened *inside his fiction* during the last decade and a half of Roth’s writing career. One couldn’t even say an interest was piqued, since as assuredly as before, Roth-the-man clung to his antireligious pronouncements, his separation from Jewish peoplehood—going so far as to choose a non-Jewish biographer and be buried in a non-Jewish cemetery. But, one might say, a door—the one that led to traditional Jewish ritual and belief—that had long been held firmly shut with both shoulders suddenly creaked open, just a little, inside his writing, revealing contents Roth himself did not want to take up in his public personae but that through his characters, and through his immense empathy for the lives and struggles of the human beings he created in his fiction, he could acknowledge was a force that commanded some form of respect, that moved people to act differently at the end of their lives, to ask different questions, to have different hopes. These three novels, each in its own way, comment on some aspect of the contents of that room which had long been closed but which opened at the illness and death of Roth’s father. It was as if, in his fiction, Roth sought a glimpse of his father’s face—while his father sat those later years at Friday evening services—one last time.



SAMUEL J. KESSLER is Assistant Professor of Religion and Bonnier Chair in Jewish Studies at Gustavus Adolphus College.

## NOTES

Versions of this article were presented as papers at the conferences “Roth@80” in Newark, NJ (March 2013), and “Philip Roth: Across Cultures, Across Disciplines” in St. Gallen, Switzerland (June 2014). Many scholars have helped me to strengthen this argument across the years, though thanks go specifically to the anonymous reviewer for *SAJL*. Most especially, however, my deepest gratitude to Tim Parrish, without whom this article would have remained on my desk. All translations of the Hebrew Bible follow Alter (2019).

1. Interestingly, the Pléiade edition of Roth includes only Jewish novels (*Goodbye, Columbus*, *Portnoy's Complaint*, *The Breast*, *My Life as a Man*, and *The Professor of Desire*), as if the publisher had decided that Roth's novels on non-Jewish subjects weren't of interest to a Francophone posterity.
2. In her abstract (though nowhere in the article itself), Naydan goes so far as to say “*American Pastoral* represents Roth's return to Judaism of a sort.” Parrish (2007, 137–38) also notes that *American Pastoral* marks a shift in Roth's relationship to the identity assimilated Jewish-American.
3. Interestingly, Mickey Sabbath shares a Christian name with Roth's uncle, who was himself an artist and whom Roth has credited with opening the family to the possibility that both Roth and his brother, Sanford (Sandy), could pursue the arts as a career (see Ollman 1988).
4. Though he continued, to the end, to be repelled by the thought of Jews finding communal or religious meaning in his works. See the interesting discussion around his early story “Eli, the Fanatic” in Bailey (2021, 173–74).
5. The fourth book in the Nemeses tetralogy is *The Humbling* (2009) and the other of the final five novels is *Exit Ghost* (2007).
6. Cf. The title track of Leonard Cohen's final album, *You Want It Darker* (2016), with its refrain of *bineini* (here I am).
7. There are many other ways to read the novel as well: about being a young and rebellious American teenager, who leaves the anxiety of his parents' home to find his own path to adulthood; as an anti-war novel, about the meaninglessness of the conflict in Korea, and how seemingly innocuous choices lead to a violent and premature death; as a novel of sexual awakening; about what young women might want and be willing to do; about homosexuality; about the underlying frustration latent in the pranks of teenage boys. For a selection of interpretations, see Simic 2008; Wolcott 2008; Royal 2009; Gates 2008.
8. Cf. Singer (1967), where the protagonist, Yoineh Meir “protested that slaughtering was not for him. He was softhearted; he could not bear the sight of blood” (60), and in the end falls into madness.

## WORKS CITED

- Aarons, Victoria. 2005. *What Happened to Abraham? Reinventing the Covenant in American Jewish Fiction*. Newark: University of Delaware Press.
- . 2007. "American-Jewish identity in Roth's short fiction." In *The Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth*, edited by Timothy Parrish, 9–21. New York: Cambridge.
- . 2013. "Expelled Once Again: The Failure of the Fantasized Self in Philip Roth's *Nemesis*." *Philip Roth Studies* 9, no. 1 (Spring): 51–63.
- Agnon, Shmuel Yosef. 1987. *Days of Awe*. New York: Schocken.
- Alter, Robert. 1978. *Defenses of the Imagination*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.
- . *The Hebrew Bible*. 2019. New York: Norton.
- Bailey, Blake. 2021. *Philip Roth: The Biography*. New York: Norton.
- Benjamin, Walter. 2007. *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken.
- Cooper, Alan. 1996. *Philip Roth and the Jews*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Eliade, Mircea. 2005. *The Myth of the Eternal Return*. Translated by Willard R. Trask. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Gates, David. 2008. "The Student of Desire." *New York Times*, September 19. [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/21/books/review/Gates-t.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/21/books/review/Gates-t.html?_r=0). Accessed 30 June 2021.
- Grumberg, Karen. 2009. "Necessary Wounds and the Humiliation of 'Galut' in Roth's 'The Counterlife' and 'Operation Shylock.'" *Philip Roth Studies* 5, no. 1: 35–59.
- Idel, Moshe. 2009. *Old Worlds New Mirrors*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Kaminsky, Inbar. 2014. "Epidemic Judaism: Plagues and Their Evocation in Philip Roth's *Nemesis* and Ben Marcus's the Flame Alphabet." *Philip Roth Studies* 10, no. 1: 109–24.
- Kaplan, Brett. 2015. *Jewish Anxiety and the Novels of Philip Roth*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Kepnes, Steven. 2013. *The Future of Jewish Theology*. Walden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Kremer, Lillian S. 2008. "Mentoring American Jews in Fiction by Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth." *Philip Roth Studies* 4, no. 1: 5–18.
- Maurer, Yael. 2011. "'If I didn't see it with my own eyes, I'd think I was having a hallucination': Re-Imagining Jewish History in Philip Roth's 'The Plot Against America.'" *Philip Roth Studies* 7, no. 1: 51–63.
- McKinley, Maggie. 2014. "Blood, Tradition, and the Distortion of Ritual in Philip Roth's *Indignation*." *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 33, no. 2: 186–201.
- Mendes-Flohr, Paul. 1984. *The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Naydan, Lillian M. 2016. "Philip Roth's Postmodern Judaism: Retold Religious Stories of Suffering in American Pastoral." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 57, no. 3: 335–47.
- O'Donoghue, Gerard. 2010. "Philip Roth's Hebrew School." *Philip Roth Studies* 6, no. 2: 153–166.

- Ollman, Leah. 1988. "Philip Roth's Brother Has No Complaint With the Billing." *Los Angeles Times*, May 12.
- Parrish, Timothy. 2007. "Roth and Ethnic Identity." In *The Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth*, edited by Timothy Parrish, 127–141. New York: Cambridge.
- Roth, Philip. 1961. "Writing American Fiction." *Commentary*, March.
- . 1963. "Writing about Jews." *Commentary*, December.
- . 1974. "Imagining Jews." *The New York Review of Books*, October 3.
- . 1991. *Patrimony*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- . 1995. *Sabbath's Theater*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- . 2006. *Everyman*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- . 2007. *Exit Ghost*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- . 2008. *Indignation*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- . 2009. *The Humbling*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- . 2010. *Nemesis*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Roth, Philip, and Robert Siegel. 2008. "In 'Indignation,' Roth Draws on His College Days." *National Public Radio*, 15 September. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=94619182?i> Accessed 30 June 2021.
- Royal, Derek Parker. 2009. "What to Make of Roth's 'Indignation'; Or, Serious in the Fifties." *Philip Roth Studies* 5, no. 1: 129–37.
- Sacks, Jonathan. 2014. "On Creative Minorities: The 2013 Erasmus Lecture." *First Things*, January. <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2014/01/on-creative-minorities>. Accessed 31 Aug. 2016.
- Scholem, Gershom. 1976. *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis: Selected Essays*. Edited by Werner J. Dannhauser. New York: Schocken.
- Simic, Charles. 2008. "The Nicest Boy in the World." *The New York Review of Books*, October 9.
- Singer, Isaac Bashevis. 1967. "The Slaughterer." *The New Yorker*, November 18, 60–65.
- Steinberg, Gillian. 2005. "Philip Roth's 'Defender of the Faith': A Modern Midrash." *Philip Roth Studies* 1, no. 1: 7–18.
- Wiesel, Elie. 1972. *Souls on Fire: Portraits and Legends of Hasidic Masters*. New York: Random House.
- . 1982. *Somewhere a Master: Further Hasidic Portraits and Legends*. New York: Summit Books.
- Wolcott, James. 2008. "The Fatal Handjob." *The New Republic*, October 22.
- Wyschogrod, Michael. 1983. *The Body of Faith: Judaism as Corporeal Election*. New York: Seabury Press.
- Yerushalmi, Yosef Hayim. 1996. *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*. Seattle: The University of Washington Press.