The root of every form of religion ... is a longing for the father.
Sigmund Freud, Totem and Taboo

I. Photographs

Let us consider a picture first, rendered in words. Philip Roth's essay of 1973, «I Always Wanted You to Admire My Fasting>, commences with a description of a photograph. The narrator, presumably Roth himself, looks at an image of Franz Kafka, taken in 1924. Kafka is 40 years old in this picture, the same age as its viewer. In the photograph, the Prague author looks «sweet and hopeful» (247), but the picture was taken, as the narrator reminds us, in the very year of his death. Would death announce itself already in this photograph? The narrator looks for the signs that might reveal the progress of Kafka's illness, turn his suffering into a visual verdict of sorts. He calls upon our own knowledge of Kafka's short life, and with the help of his description, with his eyes fixed at his photograph, the narrator is able to undermine the effect of Kafka's own, apparently hopeful, gaze:

His face is sharp and skeletal, a burrower's face: pronounced cheekbones made even more conspicuous by the absence of sideburns; the ears shaped and angled on his head like angel wings; an intense, creaturely gaze of startled composure - enormous fears, enormous control; a black towel of Levantine hair pulled close around the skull the only sensuous feature; there is a familiar Jewish flare in the bridge of the nose, the nose itself is long and weighted slightly at the tip - the nose of half of the Jewish boys who were my friends in high school. Skulls chiseled like this one were shoveled by the thousands from the ovens; had he lived, his would have been among them, along with the skulls of his three younger sisters. (247-248)

The picture links the past and future tense. It speaks of Kafka's own personality, but evokes also the image of what could be considered a «Jewish type». Looking at the photograph, the narrator predicts not only an individual's death, but also Kafka's death as an individual. Should Kafka have survived, he would have undergone a transformation from face to skull, from person to body, from skeletal shape to Holocaust victim. He would have been part of a mass murder that only his own death could help him escape. But this is not the only story the narrator imagined. Faced with this

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photograph, he does not only want to reconstruct Kafka’s biographical data and, in particular, the last year of his life. He would also like to imagine and sketch an alternative route that would neither result in immediate death, nor lead to the ovens at Auschwitz. This third option would offer him an extension of life — although at the cost of his fame as a writer.

Thus, the narrator tells a story. Kafka, the person with the «familiar Jewish flare in the bridge of his nose» becomes homeless in Prague and emigrates to America. This is just what Karl Rossmann, the main character of Kafka’s unfinished novel Amerika, had done. In America, Kafka would not become a victim of tuberculosis, nor of Nazi crimes. The narrator tries to imagine a happy end, moreover. But how could Kafka’s life achieve a happy end — and still be imagined as Kafka’s life?

In Roth’s fiction, Kafka’s life follows the story of Roth’s own family. He joins a group of immigrants, settles in New Jersey, but instead of becoming one of the narrator’s fellow class mates, he turns into their teacher. Kafka emerges as a Latin instructor nicknamed Dr. Kishka. After all, Kafka’s age in real life would have been closer to that of the narrator’s father, even though time had stood still in that photograph. Once settled, Kafka would be an eccentric inhabitant of Newark, and the narrator’s parents would have eagerly wanted to introduce him, the single teacher and scholar, to the narrator’s spinster aunt. The question of Kafka’s literary stature would no longer be relevant, only that of Kishka’s role in the narrator’s private world. Would he join the narrator’s family, and become his Uncle Kishka? His move into the narrator’s — and Roth’s — house, Kafka’s appearance at a post-war New Jersey dinner table, is already prefigured in his new name. Does not the Yiddish-Slavic «kishka» mean intestines? And does it not also designate a dish from the Eastern European, Jewish cuisine?

Let us compare Roth’s reading of Kafka’s portrait with that of another one of the writer’s photographs. In his short «History of Photography», Walter Benjamin concentrates on an image of Kafka as a child. Benjamin, in turn, does not just concentrate on Kafka’s face, but relates as well his dress and his surroundings:

At that time, studios emerged with their draperies and palm trees, tapestries, and easels, which oscillate ambiguously between execution and representation, torture chamber and throne room and from which a moving testimony is brought to us in the form of an early picture of Kafka. There, a young boy of about six years is standing in a kind of winter garden landscape, dressed in a tight, and, as it were, humbling children’s suit that is loaded down with trimmings. Palm leaves are starring in the background. And as if it counts to increase the stickiness and humidity of these upholstered tropics, the model carries a disproportionately big hat with a large rim in his left hand, just as Spaniards would wear them. Surely, the model would disap-

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Benjamin does not remark on the shape of Kafka’s face but on his «sad eyes» that are able to speak about his future. He does not imagine an alternative fate for his subject, but wants to tell about this child’s future life. Again, it seems inscribed in the photograph itself: This, indeed, would be the picture’s «truth»—an adult’s life viewed in the child’s eyes. And except for these eyes and Kafka’s uncomfortable posture, the child’s features themselves escape description. They disappear amidst a setting of overbearing clothes and furniture, of exotic accessories that give further evidence of Kafka’s present and future alienation. Benjamin is eager to place his photographic subject, and does not think about his emigration. But the notion of homelessness is central here as well, now as a displacement rendered visible. Rather than concentrating on the young boy depicted, or on his Prague environs, Benjamin has only to point at a photographic studio to show that an imaginary construction of space is at play. It is the result of the photographer’s work.

Oddly enough, in his theatrical staging of a young child, and in his Victorian longing for palm trees and Spanish hats, the photographer may have captured some truth about Kafka himself. Benjamin points at the difference with which the eye of the viewer and the lens of the camera behold their subjects. A human being consciously focuses on the subject, while the camera may make visible what a person would be unable to see. This sight can be likened to an unconscious reception, and, in referring to the technical possibilities of photographic enlargements, or the photograph’s simple freezing of time, Benjamin coins a term that would integrate this art form with science as well as therapeutic medicine. He calls it the «optical unconscious»: «About this optical-unconscious, [the viewer] will only learn from [the camera lens], just as he will learn about the instinctive-unconscious from psychoanalysis» (371).4

For Benjamin, the camera’s lens offers a truth of the subject and his times, a truth that is revealed despite, or perhaps through, the imaginary work displayed at the image’s surface. Roth in turn uses Kafka’s image to instigate an imaginary turn to himself, to transform himself into a photographer who may not be able to offer the truth of Kafka’s life and times, but point with Kafka to his own. Kafka, a potential European uncle with deadly features; a teacher of

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Latin, a dead language of the past, becomes related to, assimilated into, another figure, namely the narrator's own. Writing the image of Kafka becomes an autobiographical act.

Thus, even a stranger's photograph can speak of one's own life. In Roth, every photograph gives evidence of such a curious genealogy. In his novel *The Counterlife*, published in 1986 and dedicated to his father, Roth cites a photographic image again. The photograph doubles, and both images are fictional ones. The first picture documents the novel's hero, Nathan Zuckerman, in a meeting with Prime Minister Ben-Gurion — a founding father of the State of Israel. A second picture shows Zuckerman's younger brother Henry, as he receives his dental diploma. These photographs are placed on their father's television set to celebrate his sons' achievements — and his own success as a father. That neither event is viewed as a success by this father's sons may be a different, and alternative fiction.5

In Roth's «true story» *Patrimony*, published in 1991 as the second of a set of two seemingly straightforward autobiographical books,6 a photograph is not only described in the text, but pictured on the book's frontispiece, and even on its dust cover. It shows Roth's father, Herman, together with his sons. It is a picture of a vacation outing, and the still youthful, muscular father towers over his oldest son, Sandy, and his younger one, Philip, lined up for the camera. Towards the end of his book, Roth describes this picture as exhibited in his father's home, although copies of it exist in the houses of his sons as well. The photograph, therefore, binds the family members together, both as an image and as the material possession of its subjects and men:

On the bureau across from the sofa was the enlargement of the fifty-two-year-old snapshot, taken with a box camera at the Jersey shore, that my brother and I also had framed and situated prominently in our houses. We are posing in our bathing suits, one Roth directly behind the other, in the yard outside the Bradley Beach rooming house where our family rented a bedroom and kitchen privileges for a month each summer. This is August of 1937. We are four, nine, and thirty-six. The three of us rise upward to form a V, my two tiny sandals its pointed base, and the width of my father's solid shoulders — between which Sandy's pixyish right face is exactly centered — the letter's two impressive serifs. Yes, V for Victory is written all over that picture, for Victory, for Vacation, for upright, unbent Verticality! There we are, the male line, unimpaired and happy, ascending from nascency to maturity! (230)

Which victory is expressed here? The battle-like victory sign imagined via the bodies' shape predates the outbreak of World War II by two years. And


nothing in the picture’s representation of healthy bodies could have predicted Roth’s father’s illness at age 87, at the time of Roth’s writing. Would Roth’s fixation on an old family picture be able to reverse the flow of time, just as his look at Kafka’s photograph could extend it? In Patrimony, Roth tries to come to terms with his father’s illness, a large brain tumor, and his impending death, but the photograph described marks a peculiar failure. The photographic subject escapes Roth’s imagination by the very real presence of its subject. And thus, the experience of looking at Kafka’s image differs from that of looking at his father’s image; the imaginative work needed to translate the picture into a story is interrupted by the scar of the present tense, and the thought of the here and now. Roth, the first-person narrator of this autobiographical text, has difficulties to reunite his father’s body with his photographic image, and mentally to bridge the times between the taking of the picture and that in which he lives. This project is both an urgent and impossible one, as his visual memory and his perception of the living and ailing person do not agree:

To unite into a single image the robust solidity of the man in the picture with the strickenness on the sofa was and was not an impossibility. Trying with all my mental strength to join the two fathers and make them one was a bewildering, even hellish job. And yet I suddenly did feel (or made myself feel) that I could perfectly well remember (or make myself think I remembered) the very moment when that picture had been taken, over half a century before. I could even believe (or make myself believe) that our lives only seemed to have filtered through time, that everything was actually happening simultaneously, that I was as much back in Bradley with him towering over me as here in Elizabeth with him all but broken at my feet. (231)

Herman Roth may have been part of a victory sign in the photograph, but as time progressed, he has proven to be a questionable survivor of life. After all, he was diagnosed with a severe illness, he was suffering and facing death. But what does «surviving» mean for a person who, like Dr. Kishka, resides in New Jersey?

There was no illness for Dr. Kishka. And the other imagined story of Kafka’s life, his entering the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland, would have been a rather different fate from Herman Roth’s endurance of a brain tumor in Newark, New Jersey. Nevertheless, Roth draws these lives together closely, unites what was impossible to consider concurrently while simply looking at photographs alone. Because after World War II, nothing remained unchanged. Instead of the photograph predicting a person’s future, the reality revises the image of the past.

Just at the center of Patrimony, Roth calls an old friend of his, Joanna, who is described as a non-Jewish Eastern European immigrant. Unable to deal with his own pain of watching his father decline, he describes his present day-to-day life:
I drive him around, I sit with him, I eat with him, and all the time I’m thinking that the real work, the invisible, huge job that he did all his life, that that whole generation of Jews did, was making themselves American. The best citizens. Europe stopped with him.

But here is where Joanna responds:

«Oh, not entirely. He hasn’t given up Europe entirely», she said. «The Europe in him is his survivorship. These are people who will never give up. But they are better than Europe, too. There was gratitude in them and idealism. That basic decency.»

Roth does not reflect on Joanna’s use of the past tense that would turn his father and his father’s generation into history. «There was gratitude in them and idealism», he sums up his own feelings towards his Jewish father, for his non-Jewish woman friend, and he reflects on his own act of phoning a friend late at night: «That was why I’d called Joanna – that was what she shared with my father and what I prized in both of them: survivorship, survivorhood, survivalism (125).»

II. Roots

The notion of «survival» connects the new world with the old.

In his study on «the Jewish presence in twentieth-century American literature», Louis Harap follows a much accepted division into periods of Jewish-American writing that was also repeated in a recent Norton anthology of Jewish-American literature.\(^7\) A large number of Jewish immigrants from Europe arrived in America in the late nineteenth century, most of them escaping programs or economic hardships in the Pale. The first great surge of literature written by Jewish authors focused on the lives of these immigrants. Biography, especially a fictional one, could well account for their paths to success or failure. The best known example is perhaps Abraham Cahan’s novel *The Rise of David Levinsky*, first published in 1917, which depicts the transformation of a formerly orthodox immigrant into an assimilated American businessman.

According to Harap, the early twentieth-century also saw a different «burst of creativity» (1) that was supported by literary journals such as *Menorah*, or the *Partisan Review*. Many of the Jewish contributors to these papers were second-generation Americans. Most of them were descendants from families that hailed from Eastern Europe, and they continued to assimilate to non-Jewish Western life and learning, and integrate into «American» culture. «Immigration» was no longer part of their experience. In

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contrast to their parents' generation, they were already born in the new country, spoke English rather than Yiddish (or other languages), and were saved from many hardships that were due to the adjustments of immigration. While their newly acquired «American» culture was based on the tenets of diversity, anti-Semitism persisted in much of daily life, at least until the mid-century. Some of these new writers changed their names to ensure success and mark acculturation. Thus, the writer Nathan Weinstein became Nathanael West. Other Jewish authors – as, for example, Kenneth Fearing – were more concerned with modernist aesthetics than with issues of ethnicity or religion, or pursued socialist ideas that went beyond the differences of individual ethnic backgrounds.

Harap points at a symposium sponsored by the Contemporary Jewish Record in 1944 as an event that would document a further significant change in the American literary scene, and serve as an instigation for new writers. The symposium, entitled «Under Forty», brought together young writers to reflect on their Jewish origins, and the impact of their ethnic background or religion on their work. In a preface, the editors remarked that Jewish contributions to American literature in the previous century were «virtually unknown» (10) but that this situation was now changing: «With the coming of age of the children of Jewish immigrants, we find that quite a few of them are taking their place in the front ranks of American literature...[American Jews] are spectators no longer but full participants in the cultural life of the country.» The participants in this symposium included Delmore Schwartz, Alfred Kazin, Lionel Trilling, and Muriel Rukeyser. In 1945, just after the end of World War II, the journal Commentary was founded to replace the Contemporary Jewish Record, and under the stewardship of Elliot Cohen, it continued to publish the above mentioned authors, and further contributors such as Karl Shapiro, Paul Goodman, and Clement Greenberg.

But the public acceptance of Jewish authors was, no doubt, enhanced by the revelations of the atrocities of World War II; by the images, testimonies, and documents of the Holocaust and its victims, and a public discussion of anti-Semitism, both in Europe and in the United States, that followed. In 1952, an English translation of the Diary of Anne Frank was published that showed a young, acculturated Jewish girl who aspired to become a Dutch – and not necessarily Jewish – writer. A year later, a drama forged from her diary entries became a Broadway success.

Here, an important shift had taken place. Perhaps more so than the book, the drama was able to break the silence of the Holocaust victim. It offered a

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semblance of «authenticity», as Sander Gilman has pointed out, and lent a dead child a voice. This child, however, spoke neither Yiddish nor Dutch. The victim conversed in English, and thus, with poignancy, the story of the Holocaust moved onto the stage and entered American literature. This linguistic turn was perhaps the main event that lent credence to a mainstream recognition of Jewish-American writers, although it is significant to note that it was the voice of the Jewish victim that could first articulate this acceptance. But these new writers, seemingly liberated by the simulated voice of a dead child (if not her image), wanted to create nothing else but American – in contrast to Jewish – literature.

Thus, one can speak of a chronological discrepancy between the stronger emergence of Jewish writers in Europe and in the United States. In Germany or Austria, for example, one can point at the early twentieth century, particularly the 1920s and the time before World War II, as the period when a particularly large number of Jews or persons of Jewish descent turned towards literature, and contributed to a German literary tradition; Walter Benjamin, of course, was one of them. In America, it was the time after World War II, and particularly the fifties and sixties, when Jews or persons of Jewish descent became more prominently involved with literature, and tried to write primarily as Americans. Similar to the earlier German experience, they began to address a larger, non-Jewish audience as well. Saul Bellow’s Adventures of Augie March, published in 1953, thus commences with a sentence that caused a minor sensation. The novel’s young Jewish hero does not describe himself as a Jew first and foremost at all. He begins his tale by declaring his citizenship: «I am American, Chicago born.»

Being Jewish or being American was no longer an either/or proposition; nor was citizenship necessarily something that would be subsumed under religious or ethnic concerns. By the 1960s, three prominent novelists emerged who did not hide their Jewish identities, who wrote about Jewish characters, and who invented a language deeply imbued with Yiddish words and ethnic color, while wanting to contribute to an American literature: Bernard Malamud, born in 1914; Saul Bellow born in 1915, and Philip Roth, the youngest of the three, born in 1933. These three above all others – and the list of successful Jewish-American authors who published during this period is quite long – won literary prizes, and defined a new literary scene. With reference to a well-known clothing line, Bellow joked famously that Malamud, Roth and he were the «Hart, Schaffner and Marx» of American literature. Roth in turn would draw on Malamud’s characteristics and features for his depiction of the writer, mentor, «maestro» E.I. Lonoff in his

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novel *The Ghost Writer* (1979); Lonoff is much revered by younger writers, as for example by the novel’s main character, Nathan Zuckerman.\(^{12}\)

But Roth would single out Bellow’s influence on his work. Summarizing an interview with Roth, David Remnick writes that Bellow «gave [Roth] permission to cut loose, to write not of a victimized European generation living in the shadowland of immigration but of a younger generation steeped in America, in its freedom and talk, its energies and superabundance.»\(^{13}\) And cut loose he did. Roth took the license to break the taboos that anti-Semitism and the Holocaust seemed to have put into place. He set out to depict Jews as flawed, neurotic, narcissistic, and filled with sexual longings.

Thus, just at the point at which the Jewish-American writer seemed to have been accepted by a wider readership and into an American literary tradition, Bellow as well as Roth resisted the label of «Jewish» or «Jewish-American» literature outright. For Bellow, being a «Jewish-American writer» would signify something «parochial», and he saw his Judaism as one part of his identity among others: «I’m well aware of being Jewish and also of being American and of being a writer. But I’m also a hockey fan, a fact which nobody ever mentions.»\(^{14}\) Roth in turn does not only subject «Jewishness» itself to scrutiny, but sees it as part of one’s self-conception. It becomes part of the creative endeavor: One would have to discover what it could mean to be «a Jew». Thus, the tables seem to have turned. For Roth, it is one’s American identity that has to be taken for granted, while one’s Jewish identity becomes elusive, indeed. It is a matter of one’s own construction. What has happened in only a generation or two?

III. The Gift

For Roth, this question would be asked and enacted, again and again, in his novels and in his autobiographies. He focuses on it as he describes the relationship of father Zuckerman to his son in several of his novels, for example, or in interviews responding to the reaction of rabbis and Jewish readers to his fiction. In *The Ghost Writer*, Nathan Zuckerman was chastised by his father for betraying his people by stressing the weaknesses of Jews, and thus enforcing the production of Jewish stereotypes. Judge

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\(^{12}\) See, for example, Martin Tucker: «The Shape of Exile in Philip Roth, or the Part is Always Apart». In: Asher Z. Milbauer/Donald G. Watson: *Reading Philip Roth*. New York 1988, 38.


\(^{14}\) Chametzky/Felstiner/Flanzbaum/Hellerstein, *Jewish American Literature* (see note 7), 749. See also Podhoretz: «The Adventures of Philip Roth» (see note 11), 26.
Wapner, an acquaintance of his father, asks Nathan to reconsider his work, which he deems to be outrageous, and asks him to answer simple questions such as: «If you had been living in Nazi Germany in the thirties, would you have written such a story?»¹⁵ And he advises Nathan to watch the Broadway play of *Anne Frank* to consider his conscience and find his Jewish identity.

*Patrimony* bears the subtitle «a true story», and describes Roth's own relationship to his father, who appears more tolerant and encouraging than the elder Zuckerman. But the issue of betrayal is central here as well, not that of the Jewish people as a whole, but of his father. This implicit reproach looms large. Instead of responding to it by writing a letter to his father (as Kafka most famously did, to a father called Hermann as well), instead of being blamed outright in a letter from Judge Wapner (as Nathan Zuckerman was), Roth describes a different letter altogether, one in which the father feels the need to justify himself before his son. The son may be afraid to betray his father, but the father is also eager to explain. Unlike Kafka's letter, this one is posted; not to Roth himself, but to his brother Sandy. Roth reprints it in full. «Dear Sandy», it begins, «I think there are two type’s of (among people) Philosophies. People who care, and those that don’t, People who do and people who Procrastinate and never do or help.» Part of the father’s doing is interfering, described here as a repeated reminder, a *hocking*, a Yiddish term. Roth's father insists on this term:

> Why do I continue, hocking? I realize it's a pain in the ass, but if its people I care for I will try to cure, even if they object or wont: dicingpl disaplin themselves I including myselfe. I have many battles with my concience, but I fight my wronge thoughts. I care, for people in my way. Please excuse the spelling and writing. I was never a good writer but now its worse, I don’t see so good

> The Hocker, Misnomer
> It should be the carer
> Love
> Dad. (80-81)

In offering this letter to his readers, Roth does not only violate the privacy of an epistolary communication between a father and his other son. Herman Roth, barely literate, is hardly able to write English. Philip, the famous writer, is not only the son of a man who is unable to spell, but of a man who insists on transgressing to another language. He insists on the meaning of a Yiddish word, *hocking*, to explain his own behavior; no English word would do. Is Philip the superior penman, or is he the person who can do nothing but find the wrong names; is he a «misnomer» himself?

While Nathan Zuckerman leaves his father's house to seek parental care at the home of the writer Lonoff, Hermann Roth turns out to be father and writing teacher in one. His display of remembered facts about the family, Newark, and its Jewish inhabitants is not only the repertoire of Roth the elder, but translates into the literary repertoire of the younger as well: «family, family, family, Newark, Newark, Newark, Jew, Jew, Jew». «Something like mine», Roth adds. Roth's fiction and his «true stories» fold into one another as a form of hocking, moreover, as repetitive variations on a theme that circle on what is left, and ask for what one should still care.

Thus, Roth's fear of betrayal produces betrayal and exposure, and these offer in turn a view of his father's gifts. But how does he pass them on? This question is particularly poignant as the father wishes to leave nothing behind, to get rid of all of his possessions. Roth's narrative, Patrimony, thus adds page after page, as his father Herman Roth divests himself of material objects. Just after his wife's funeral, he throws out her clothes. He offers his own father's shaving mug, which he confesses to have once craved himself, to Philip in a brown paper bag. Another paper bag holds his tefillin, the Jewish ritual prayer garments, and is left behind in the local YMHA's gym locker room. Getting rid of things becomes a form of mourning, of relinquishing objects of one's past, of turning them meaningless just because they hold too much meaning.

In his essay on «Mourning and Melancholia», Freud describes mourning as a healthy process which tries to aim towards an ending, while melancholia continues without a proper end in sight. As a writer, Roth may be able to describe the mourning process, but his efforts continue, necessarily, in a melancholic way. Roth, the younger, can account for the lost objects, but cannot stop writing. And he proceeds to disrobe his father. Roth's previous books may have shocked readers because of his descriptions of masturbation and sexual urges; he is now willing to face what could be considered yet another taboo. He describes his father's nakedness. And this description does not just stress the father's vulnerability, his need of care. Against all Biblical prohibition, Roth cannot help but offer his father's private parts for public view. He compares his father's penis to his own, not as a gesture of competition, but as one of acknowledgment, and he imagines (and hopes for) pleasures past. But no such gesture can remain innocent, of course. By exposing his father's penis, he reduces the phallus to a mere corporeal part; he disempowers his father by exhibiting the symbol of procreation itself.

without which any genealogy would be impossible. Moreover, it is the bodily part on which his Judaism is inscribed, the mark of the compact between the Jew and his God. Betrayal and confirmation go hand in hand.

Another scene offers a similar dialectics. Roth does not only expose his father’s naked body, or his writing, but also his excrement to the reader’s view. After his father «beshaq» himself, as Herman remarks (172) in ancient seeming prose, Roth cleans up his body and enters a bathroom in disarray:

The bathroom looked as though some spiteful thug had left his calling card after having robbed the house. As my father was tended to and he was what counted, I would just as soon have nailed the door shut and forgotten that bathroom forever. «It’s like writing a book», I thought – «I have no idea where to begin.» (173)

But Roth, the writer and son, proceeds with cleaning:

You clean up your father’s shit because it has to be cleaned up, but in the aftermath of cleaning it up, everything that’s there to feel is felt as it never was before. It wasn’t for the first time that I’d understood this either: once you sidestep disgust and ignore nausea and plunge past those phobias that are fortified like taboos, there’s an awful lot of life to cherish...

And why this was right and as it should be couldn’t have been plainer to me, now that the job was done. So that was the patrimony. And not because cleaning it up was symbolic of something else but because it wasn’t, because it was nothing less or more than the lived reality that it was.

There was my patrimony: not the money, not the tefillin, not the shaving mug, but the shit. (175–6)

The very crudeness of this scene evokes an equally crude material notion of writing. It appears here as an arduous, non-glamorous task of cleaning up, of making sense of meaningless excrement, of a process that cannot be completed without leaving traces behind.

IV. Facts and Figures

«Who are we, anyway? And why?» Nathan Zuckerman asks in the afterword to Philip Roth’s autobiography, _The Facts_, a book that preceded _Patrimony_ by a couple of years.²⁸ _The Facts_ offers a narrative of Roth’s youth, his college experience, marriages, affairs, and literary struggles and successes. While Roth purports to offer revelations about his life, he selects few experiences for perusal, and discreetly changes the names of his former wife and lovers. Thus, _The Facts_ offers fiction, too, complicating further the intricate relationship between Roth’s life experiences and his novels, a rela-
tionship that Peter J. Bailey calls «autobiografiction», and Régine Robin «autofiction» – mistaking The Facts for its truth value, nevertheless. In The Facts, Roth feels the need to compare his life to fiction, again and again, primarily to books of his own. Thus he writes that he just felt like Zuckerman on one occasion, or acted like one of his characters in another. And while Robert Pinsky regards Patrimony as a «cunningly straightforward» book, Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky claims that Roth is «up to his usual tricks.» Indeed, Herman Roth’s portrait seems decidedly familiar; his digestive difficulties, for example, have already been experienced by Alexander Portnoy’s father in Portnoy’s Complaints (1969).

Part of Roth’s own brand of post-modern writing thus crosses the lines between fact and fiction constantly, and adds question marks to both. Not only does he seem to stage the different possibilities of narrative, as witnessed in the alternative lives of Nathan Zuckerman and his brother, Henry, in The Counterlife. Deception, a novel written during his father’s illness, may or may not refer to his relationship with Claire Bloom. His fiction, as well as his autobiographical accounts, provide similar «deceptions» and counter-lives. In his many interviews, Roth’s strong rejection of any autobiographical reading of his novels rivals his strong rejection of producing «Jewish» literature. About his novel The Ghost Writer, Roth writes, for example, that it is

an imaginary biography, an invention stimulated by themes in my experience to which I’ve given considerable thought, but the result of a writing process a long way from the methods, let alone the purposes of autobiography. If an avowed autobiographer transformed his personal themes into a detailed narrative embodying a reality distinct and independent from his own day-to-day history, peopled with imaginary characters conversing in words he’d never heard spoken, given meaning by a sequence of events that had never taken place, we wouldn’t be surprised if he was charged with representing as his real life what was an outright lie.

May I quote John Updike? Asked about my Zuckerman books, he said to an interviewer «Roth’s inventing what looks like a roman à clef but is not.»

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21 See for example Philip Roth, The Facts (see note 6), 149.
The Facts, in contrast, purport to tell of Roth’s own life from his childhood to the present, and Patrimony, the «true story» describes his father’s illness and death. But more than the relationship of fact and fiction needs to be questioned here. It is Patrimony rather than The Facts that seems to reveal more of the writer, that shows an emotional engagement that is absent in the other book. Can Roth only «truly» write about his life by mirroring himself in his father’s photograph?

Patrimony begins with an account of his father’s symptoms – troubles with his eyes, a deformation of his face that was first diagnosed as Bell’s palsy. Roth recounts further doctor’s visits, the diagnosis of a tumor, and the decision to deny his father a complicated, risky operation that would have only stalled his decline. The narrative ends with Herman Roth’s death. Inserted are Roth’s reflections on his father’s mourning his wife’s death, his visits to Florida, and his later friendship with a woman neighbor, Lil. Roth describes his father’s male friends, his caretaker and nurse, but also his own childhood in Newark and his parents’ family history. The impending death offers Roth the opportunity to reconstruct a life, and to reconstruct his own life story as consequence. Slowly, the roles reverse: the caring father becomes the child in need of a bath and feeding, the son becomes the parent who takes care. This reversal becomes complicated by the son’s own childlessness, by the fact that there is no other generation to whom he can pass on his family’s story. The father turned into a child also becomes this generation’s end.

Caretaking, however, does not begin or end with the father/son relationship. The photograph of the father and his two sons does not show any mother. Is she the person behind the camera? What does her absence mean? Like a ghost, the mother haunts the father/son relationship and its story. Roth recounts how eagerly the father disposes of the mother’s property after her death, including mementoes of Roth’s own life that the mother had preserved. En route to his father to tell him about the doctor’s diagnosis of a tumor, Roth mistakes an exit and ends up at the cemetery where his mother’s body rests. Herman Roth in turn judges Lil and other women by his former wife Bess’ perfection. A measure for proper behavior is provided by the dead. Only in the earlier The Facts, written during his father’s lifetime, does an image of the mother appear, reflected as the speechless, languageless influence of her body:

The link to my father was never so voluptuously tangible as the colossal bond to my mother’s flesh, whose metamorphosed incarnation was a sleek black sealskin coat into which I, the younger, the privileged, the pampered papoose, blissfully wormed myself whenever my father chauffeured us home to New Jersey on a winter Sunday from our semiannual excursion to Radio City Music Hall and Manhattan’s Chinatown: the unnameable animal-me bearing her dead father’s name, the protoplasm-me, boy-baby, and body-borrower-in-training, joined by every nerve ending to her smile and her sealskin coat, while his resolute dutifulness, his relentless industriousness, his unreasoning obstinacy and
harsh resentments, his illusions, his innocence, his allegiances, his fears were to constitute the original mold for the American, Jew, citizen, man, even for the writer, I would become. To be at all is to be her Philip, but in the embroilment with the buffeting world, my history still takes its spin from beginning as his Roth. (18–19)

While the father supplies Roth with his language and the themes of his literature, his relationship to the mother is non-verbal, and only silently inscribed in Patrimony.

There, the mother’s absence provides another chord of mourning, much like Roland Barthes’ mother’s absence does in his Camera Lucida. In that essay, she is supposedly captured in a photographic image that the protagonist searches for, one that remains invisible for the reader. But in Patrimony, there is a curious scene, when motherhood reappears, not as a reference to an absent body, but to present behavior. Roth overhears his father praising Roth’s care to his friend Lil, and the mother (and wife) seems curiously revived. «Philip is like a mother to me», he says (181). By describing his father’s naked body, by treating him as a child and as a son, Roth seemed to disempower him. But the father strikes back, and turns the son into his mother. He not only confirms the generational reversal, but questions the presence of the phallus itself. «Philip is right», Rubin-Dorsky writes, «this father is no poet; he is the vernacular itself, and with one word – <mother> instead of <father> – the dying Herman puts his son back in a subordinate place, proving he is still a force to contend with» (143).

Would it be impossible to care for one’s father like a father? Roth wonders (181), but in drawing his father’s bath, he realizes himself that he had assumed his mother’s role:

I sat on the edge of the tub while the water ran, testing the temperature with my fingers – my mother, I remembered, used to test it with her elbow... He was kicking his legs forcefully up and down now, rather like a baby playing in the water, but there was nothing of a baby’s delight in his grimly set half-face. (177)

Thus, Roth is also mourning his mother by incorporating her.

V. American Dreams

But just as the question of survivorship, and the incorporation of one’s mother, precede under the image of the Holocaust and the images of its American reception, it may be interesting to compare this scene with one from Roth’s fictional account, The Ghost Writer. Zuckerman, seeking refuge and advice in Lonoff’s isolated country house, meets a young woman there, Amy Bellette, who is in charge of sorting out his papers for the Harvard Library. Amy was born in Europe, had been sponsored by Lonoff to come to the United States, and had become his student. She seems to be in
love with her former teacher, but in Zuckerman’s fantasy, she becomes his own love object. He imagines her to be none other than Anne Frank; Judge Wapner had already advised him to see the dramatic staging of her life. In Lonoff’s house, he seems to find her in person; no longer a child, but quite grown up.

And as Kafka in Roth’s story is transformed into Dr. Kishka, Anne could escape death, and live on under an assumed name. But there is a perverse logic to her underground survival, which keeps her from telling her own father that she is, indeed, alive. Only by claiming her own death can she preserve the legacy of a Dutch victim and her extraordinary diary. Anne does not want her literary work to diminish in importance, an importance that she can only certify by her own death. Thus, Roth here sketches another story of father and child; this one of a daughter who keeps her legacy of Jewish survival by preserving herself as an author and a figure of the past. As Amy Bellette, however, she would be free to marry Zuckerman, and Zuckerman would become a prodigal son, and return home engaged to a mythologized victim of the Holocaust. He would find redemption — and his father’s recognition — by offering Anne Frank as his ultimate «trump card».

How would his father be able to describe Anne Frank’s fiancé as a traitor of the Jews?

The scene of Zuckerman’s fantasy about Amy Bellette is provocative within the novel, but in the context of Patrimony, it offers yet another glimpse of the mother figure. Roth may become a mother to the father, but the child Anne can grow up and protect the son. Preceding him with her writing, she offers a certification of her truth by her death, just as Zuckerman wants to offer his father a certification of his truth by his marriage to Bellette. Roth, writing his account of his father’s illness, had already been an eager reader of Anne Frank’s words.

«Are you always fighting with your father?» Zuckerman’s gentile girlfriend Diana asks him in yet another novel, the Anatomy Lesson. But that book, first published in 1983, provides the reader with another letter as well. That letter has not been written by a father, but by Zuckerman’s mother, ill, and in the hospital. To check his treatment, her neurologist had asked her to write out her own name. After her death, the doctor hands Zuckerman the piece of paper on which his mother had written. There, in perfect spelling, his mother wrote: «Holocaust»:

This was in Miami Beach in 1970, inscribed by a woman whose writings otherwise consisted of recipes on index cards, several thousand thank-you notes, and a voluminous file of

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26 See Sanford Pinsker: «Marrying Anne Frank: Modernist Art, the Holocaust, and Mr. Philip Roth». In: Holocaust Studies Annual III, ed. Pinsker and Jack Fischel (Greenwood, FL 1985), 54.
knitting instructions. Zuckerman was pretty sure that before that morning she'd never even spoken the word aloud. (477)

«Holocaust» turns into his mother's secret name, offered to her surviving son. Neither the neurologist, nor Zuckerman can discard this piece of paper, which becomes his mother's legacy. And by their inability to discard the piece of paper, the silent writing permeates the novel, and reemerges again and again in other books, as in Patrimony itself. If the Jewish religion is passed on by the mother, this is perhaps what her legacy has become, curiously blending with Herman Roth's own feats in recounting people and places from the past. Remembering the Holocaust and thinking of one's own family intertwine in Roth's fiction and his autobiographical writings. They become one, subsumed under an almost Biblical call for memory that was written by the fictional mother, but issued by Herman Roth himself, whose words, written down as his son's, provide the Patrimony's end, and offer the memoirs own call to survival: «You must not forget anything» (238).

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28 See also the discussion in Hana Wirth-Nesher: «From Newark to Prague: Roth's Place in the American Jewish Literary Tradition». In: Id. (Ed.): What is Jewish Literature? Philadelphia 1994, 215.