

How Literature Shapes Lives: Philip Roth's Metafiction and Fluid Identities in the Secular Nation-State

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses how Philip Roth's *The Counterlife* uses metafiction to portray the plasticity of identities in a critical stance against exclusivist attitudes in nation-states. After an analysis of Roth's use of self-reflexivity, this research juxtaposes two conflicting accounts of nation-state by Roth and Anderson. Through this comparison, the paper puts forward that Roth's fiction continuously undermines unisonance in nation-state. This research highlights the significance of writing and self-referentiality in Roth's novel, as political tools of continuously reshaping not only identities but also identity categories in nation-states.

"The burden isn't either/or, consciously choosing from possibilities equally difficult and regrettable—it's and/and/and/and/and as well. Life *is* and: the accidental and the immutable, the elusive and the graspable, the bizarre and the predictable, the actual and the potential, all the multiplying realities, entangled, overlapping, colliding, conjoined—plus the multiplying illusions! This times this times this times this ... Is an intelligent human being likely to be much more than a large-scale manufacturer of misunderstanding?" (*The Counterlife* 306)

INTRODUCTION

Philip Roth's *The Counterlife* asks several challenging and deliberately disturbing questions regarding national and religious belonging(s) in the nation-state. Roth's novel is distinguished not only for raising these questions, but also for the specific ways it asks them, employing certain literary techniques to discuss identity issues. More specifically, through literature and metafiction, Roth's work opens a dialogue with and questions theories of the nation-state that impose forms of belonging to individuals and communities. Through its clever use of literary self-referentiality, Roth's *The Counterlife* undermines and reshapes not only characters' identities, but also the identity categories.

This paper addresses the connection between literature and identity issues in the nation-state. First, I demonstrate how Roth's *The Counterlife* shows that writing is at the very core not only of nation-making, but also of all constructions of identity. Roth's novel achieves this through a distinctive use of metafiction. I explain how the novel discusses issues of belonging through its form. Then, I turn to the problem of the fluidity or the solidity of the concept of *self* and identities in the nation-state. I contend that *The Counterlife* has a particular emphasis on the fluidity of all collective identities; that is, the novel develops its argument for the plasticity of identities based on the specific concept of performance. I explore how Roth uses this term in opposition to Benedict Anderson's unisonance and uniformity in the nation-state.

Next, I demonstrate how *The Counterlife* deals with the exclusivist language shared by almost all of its characters. This, I propose, is also reflected in the form of the novel through shifts in the narrative techniques. Just like the nation-state has bounded and exclusivist structures, Roth shows that individuals, too, partake in the grammar of *us vs. them*. Such a common and destructive trait of identity politics makes it impossible to constitute an open membership without inherent hostilities within nations, as argued by Benedict Anderson, who studies nations at the social level.

However, I argue that Roth's novel switches the scale from the social to the individual level, thus showing his readers how all individual members suffer from such belligerent attitudes, frequently fueled by racism, and religious and ethnic hatred. I argue that this is one major difference between (Anderson's) theory and (Roth's) literary work, regarding the methodology of studying the nation and belonging.

In the conclusion, I establish that none of the five fictional landscapes in Roth's novel points to an actually genuine secular locus or topos. I propose that *The Counterlife* presents to its readers that nation-states are rather clash-zones of national and religious identity conflicts, and as such are anything but secular. In addition, I illustrate Philip Roth's unique way of criticizing all sorts of belonging/identity structures in the context of his literary constructions of Jewishness across the boundaries. Roth's novel, I contend, is thought-provoking, and has a pessimistic tone regarding the issues of ethnic and religious identities in the nation-state. This section also includes critiques of Roth's interlocutors, which can help elucidate the unique approach of *The Counterlife* to issues of belonging and identity politics in the nation-state.

WRITING AND METAFICTION IN *THE COUNTERLIFE*

The relationship between form and content has been a matter of discussion not only in art, but also in the field of literature for a long time. This duality exists because how an idea is expressed is at least as influential as the idea itself. In other words, as Claudio Guillén explains, the form of a work is "the visible manifestation... of formation, making, *poiesis*." (36) In this regard, the design or the form of a literary work is a vital component of the meaning-making process, to a degree that the form becomes an element that equally creates the content, meaning, or idea. In some literary works, the clever use of form considerably contributes to the articulation of ideas, or to the *content* of the work of art. Philip Roth's *The Counterlife* is such a literary work. For this reason, I will analyze how Roth uses metafiction and hence brings writing to the very center of identity construction in the nation-state. I illustrate how through complex self-referentiality of the text, Roth's work shows the plasticity of identities that may appear to be rigid.

The Counterlife deliberately distorts the regular, usual or expected flow of events in a way to disturb the reader. Each chapter is an imaginary socio-political landscape: The first chapter, *Basel* is the story of Nathan's brother Henry, a well-off Jew living in the United States, who dreams of establishing a new life with a Shiksa¹ in Europe after heart surgery to cure his impotence, but dies during the surgery. The second chapter, *Judea*, turns the previous chapter upside down and the narrative begins again: Henry survives the operation, regains his sexual prowess,² moves to a West Bank settlement in Israel, where he starts learning Hebrew and lives with fundamentalist/Orthodox Jews like Mordecai Lippman. The third chapter, *Aloft*, is at mid-point in the narration, and depicts Nathan's disappointment in his failure to communicate with his brother in Israel and his return to the United States. On the plane returning to America, he meets

half-crazy Jimmy, who attempts to hijack an Israeli commercial plane, and claims to have brought explosives on board wanting to convey his message to the world: Jews should no longer be captive of their past and they should "forget remembering"³ (*CL* 181). The fourth chapter, *Gloucestershire* comes with another narrative twist: now, Nathan is the impotent brother who plans to move to England with his *shiksa* Maria. The fictitious author, Nathan Zuckerman, experiences British anti-Semitism, decides to have heart surgery to cure his impotence, but cannot survive. The last chapter is another political *topos*: *Christendom*. This chapter returns to the narratives of *Judea* and *Aloft*, in which Maria and Nathan review all the *counter-lives*, narratives and their counter-narratives both retrospectively and prospectively.⁴

That each chapter undoes the narrative of the previous chapters is one inventive way to address intricate issues of belonging. This metafictional narrative design is so complex that Alan Cooper defines it as "a story, within a story, and then as a story within a story within a story" (214). At one level, *The Counterlife* is a work and a statement on Jewishness and Jewish identities across the world. As Debra Shostak explains, the structure of the novel "consistently reinvent[s] the *being*⁵ of central characters" (131). In so doing, Roth's novel continuously reminds its readers that there are always alternative ways of existing, and that seemingly solid ethnic or religious identities could very well transform into something else, even their opposites. Shostak also points out that there are at least two functions of Roth's metafiction in *The Counterlife*: the first is "multiplying meanings through accretion" and the second is the portrayal of a "future-directed gesture toward being" (212). One function, then, of Roth's self-reflexivity is to not allow any specific (Jewish) identities to be superior to any other. The other attribute is the assertion that all characters and hence all sorts of belonging are flexible and open to transformation, no matter how rigid, conventional, and Orthodox they may seem.

The fictitious author is another complex use of metafiction in *The Counterlife*. Nathan Zuckerman, the fictitious novelist from Newark, New Jersey, is a character in several Roth novels. As Charles Berryman reports, Zuckerman first appeared in an early work, *My Life as a Man* (1974), as a character created by another fictitious author, Peter Tarnopol. This was followed by his subsequent novels, *The Ghost Writer* (1979) and *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981) (178). In *Zuckerman Unbound*, Nathan Zuckerman has become a well-known fictitious author and the writer of a controversial and fictitious novel, *Carnovsky*,⁶ which is also at the center of several conflicts in *The Counterlife* (*CL* 29, 74, 91, 99, 174, 206, 208-215, 218, 226, 227, 237, 279, and 313). Regarding the relationship between Nathan Zuckerman and Philip Roth, one could think that Nathan is just one of several colorful characters created by Roth. Yet, this would be a true, but not an entirely convincing statement: the character of Nathan has a special place in Roth's work, as Nathan's metafictional presence as a fictitious author makes a significant contribution to Roth's literary statement on several identity issues regarding secularism and the nation-state.

Why would an author interested in Jewishness, belonging, and identity politics pursue such an intricate narrative

technique? One of the many consequences of using the literary device of metafiction in this way is to establish a distance between the actual author and his work. Such a literary buffer may seem to be reasonable, because attack *on the writer and writing*⁷ is one of the strong themes in *The Counterlife*. For instance, Henry Zuckerman states that Nathan Zuckerman is an “unregenerate defiler ... irritant in the Jewish bloodstream, making people uncomfortable and angry by looking with a mirror up his own asshole, really despised by a lot of smart people, offensive to every possible lobby” (CL 219). Roth makes sure that the hatred is not directed at Nathan on a personal level, but as a writer: “These writers are great—real fakes. Want it all.⁸ Madly aggressive, shit on the page, shoot on the page, show off their every last fart on the page—and for that they expect medals. Shameless. You gotta love ‘em” (CL 219). As this quotation shows, writers of identity politics such as Philip Roth may get criticized for their controversial ideas on national identities.

The presence of such a hostile reaction in the novel corresponds to a relationship between writing and the creation of identities. In this respect, it is no surprise that the literary freedom enjoyed by the fictitious author Nathan Zuckerman takes a lot of heat. By having Zuckerman take control of creating all the characters and conflicts through his manuscript, and by letting him take all the heat in the novel, Philip Roth makes a literary statement about the following. First, he shows that he is fully aware of the theoretical discussion on the fictionality of all identities: all the characters created and depicted by Nathan Zuckerman in *The Counterlife* have the plasticity to start another life in another chapter of the book. Secondly, such a multiplicity of Jewish identities is a direct refutation of Anderson’s theory and assumption that nationalism is a unisonant structure. Third, Roth’s fiction shifts the center of creation: it is no longer the *state*⁹ that holds the power over the nation, but now, as Roth puts it, it is the writer and his ability to create, question and challenge all sorts of belonging(s) in the nation-state.

COUNTERLIVES: FLUIDITY OF ALL COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES

Philip Roth deals with several dualities regarding identity issues in the nation-state. *The Counterlife* emphasizes the unproductiveness of defining the self in terms of constricting identity patterns. For instance, some of the problematic dichotomies in the novel as defined by Shostak are “normal versus abnormal,” “Diaspora versus *aliyah*,”¹⁰ “goy versus Jew,” “force as an acknowledgement of difference versus the pastoral as a vision of unity” (132). These main conflicts among the Diaspora, homeland Jews and Europeans are articulated through the shifting narratives of each chapter and are represented by specific characters in the novel. This is exactly where the name of the novel originates: each character has an ante or an other, and the fictional writer, Nathan Zuckerman, keeps inventing and reinventing them. Like the imagined structure of the nation-state, the author keeps emphasizing (through the form of the novel, the metafiction) that all identities are plastic; that is, never solid. Through the fiction(s) of Nathan Zuckerman and his recovered notes

that turned into the novel we are reading, lives, counter-lives and conflicting identities parade through the world of the novel. With each chapter, the stereotypes literally come and go, which also shows the temporality of these imagined, fictional identities. The concept of temporality of identity is an important idea ignored in Anderson’s theory, but cleverly emphasized in Roth’s fiction.

What exactly does *the counterlife* mean? The title comes from a specific consequence of exclusivist identity politics in the nation-state, and the metafiction in the novel is at the very core of this issue. Through its metafictional form, *The Counterlife* asks a basic, but very challenging question. In his letter to his brother Henry (who is a fundamentalist Jew in this chapter), fictitious author Nathan Zuckerman asks: what is a Jew? What is being a Jew?

Look at the place you now want to call home: a whole *country* imagining itself, asking itself, “What the hell is this business of being a Jew?”—people losing sons, losing limbs, losing this, losing that, in the act of answering. “What is a Jew in the first place?” It’s a question that’s always had to be answered: the sound “Jew” was not made like a rock in the world—some human voice once said “Djoo,” pointed to somebody, and that was the beginning of what hasn’t stopped since. (145)

The answer, once more, comes from both the form and the content of the novel. Roth’s work emphasizes that being a Jew is not something constant, unchanging, timeless, or holy. On the contrary, for Roth, being a Jew is something invented. Like the arbitrariness of sounds, words and meaning in Saussure’s language theory, Nathan Zuckerman maintains that Jewishness is an arbitrary, changeable entity based on social conventions that cannot be reduced to a set of rules or practices.¹¹ This is exactly what Roth’s novel criticizes: the rules, conventions, traditions and all the elements that make Jewishness in Henry’s or Lippman’s sense, that is, anything solid and exclusivist. All are rejected by *The Counterlives* through the novel’s metafiction. Nathan Zuckerman continues his letter to his brother Henry, by challenging the authenticity of an identity, and the idea of being an *authentic Jew*:

Your connection to Zionism seems to me to have little to do with feeling more profoundly Jewish or finding yourself endangered, enraged, or psychologically straitjacketed by anti-Semitism in New Jersey—which doesn’t make the enterprise any less “authentic”. It makes it absolutely classical. Zionism, as I understand it, originated not only in the deep Jewish dream of escaping the danger of insularity and the cruelties of social injustice and persecution but out of a highly conscious desire to be divested of virtually everything that had come to seem, to the Zionists as much as to the Christian Europeans, distinctively Jewish behavior—to reverse the very form of Jewish existence. The construction of a counterlife that is one’s own antimyth was at its very core. It was a species of fabulous utopianism, a manifesto for human transformation as extreme—and, at the outset, as implausible—as any ever conceived. A Jew could be a new person if he wanted to. In the early days of the state¹² the idea appealed to almost everyone except the Arabs. All over the world, people were rooting for the

Jews to go ahead and un-Jew themselves in their own little homeland. I think that's why the place was once universally so popular—no more Jewy Jews, great! (*The Counterlife* 147)

In this regard, the title of the book, *the counterlife*, comes from this passage, as does the idea that Jewishness is not something stable, but is a principle of re-inventing one's self. According to Nathan Zuckerman, this principle was formerly ingrained in Jewishness, when Jews escaped the danger of the "insularity" in Europe to create a counterlife for themselves, a new reality away from anti-Semitism. Nathan maintains that socio-political conditions forced Jewish communities to reverse the very form of Jewish existence. This is *the counterlife*, and there was an "antimyth" attitude at its core. According to Nathan, this is why that utopian attitude, the desire to redefine Jewishness in Israel, looked like a promising idea to almost everyone in the world. Yet, this is not the case anymore in Roth's novel. Nathan Zuckerman implies that Jewishness in Israel fell prey to itself, to a sort of fundamentalism and exclusivist identity politics. Metafiction in Roth's work becomes a means of debunking this myth and the assumption that being Jewish is comprised of a historically defined set of rules and principles. In other words, the name of the novel *counterlife* accounts for what Cooper calls "man's fictive power to create" and to question "any imaged and reified alternative to one's seeming life" (217).

In addition to the use of a fictitious author, *The Counterlife* has other uses of metafiction. One of the most important examples of this self-reflexivity appears in the formation process of the text/novel we read. In the first chapter, we learn that Nathan Zuckerman had written a volume about his brother Henry and his Swiss mistress. This text becomes the backbone of the first chapter, *Basel*, as well as the eulogy that Nathan writes for his brother, and refuses to read¹³ during the funeral (CL 42). In chapter four, *Gloucestershire*, (after the death of Nathan), Henry Zuckerman finds a manuscript which is a draft of the novel we are now reading as actual writers, because each chapter, the titles of the places in each chapter, or the first chapter named "Basel" all correspond to the actual novel, *The Counterlife*. Interestingly, the manuscript Henry reads on page 230 of the novel is word-for-word the same as on pages 155-156 in the *Aloft* chapter. Similarly, Nathan's eulogy on page 211 is repeated on page 231, while Henry reads the manuscript he finds (*Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth* 29). After so many layers of metafiction that remind the reader of a literary labyrinth, we may be ready to accept that the manuscript Henry finds in the fourth chapter is indeed the novel we are reading. Nevertheless, nothing is that simple and straightforward in Roth's novel, and the same goes for his use of metafiction. With another plot-twist, Henry feels ashamed, and steals all except the fourth chapter, because this is the only chapter that Nathan did not write about him (Henry). He also looks for copies of Draft 2 and Draft 1 of the manuscript (CL 231).

Considering these examples, it is clear that the metafiction of *The Counterlife* deliberately complicates the narrative. Another way of achieving this effect is intertextuality. The intertextuality in *The Counterlife* is based on a fictitious novel, *Carnovsky*, written by the fictitious author Nathan

Zuckerman. This imaginary novel is at least as influential and real as any other real novel. *Carnovsky* appears in several other of Roth's works, such as *The Anatomy Lesson*, *Zuckerman Unbound* and *Portnoy's Complaint* (Cooper 138). In *The Counterlife*, *Carnovsky* is at the very core of not only the narrative, but also Roth's views on the secular nation-state.

The following points exemplify some of the critical *Carnovsky* passages in *The Counterlife*. Henry¹⁴ feels obsessed with the idea that his whole life could be a "sequel to *Carnovsky*" (CL 10). Later, *Carnovsky* is mentioned as a novel where the Jewish Zuckerman family is "depicted so farcically" (29). In the fourth chapter, *Carnovsky* appears one more time, as a "comic hyperbole insidiously undermining everything it chose to touch" (CL 205), and this fictitious novel with "underhanded attack, deviously legitimizing itself as 'literature,'" ridicules the Jewish Zuckerman family one more time. This imaginary novel is the main source of conflict "designed to destroy our¹⁵ family ... no matter how much they say about art" (CL 206). Nathan Zuckerman, the author of *Carnovsky* has "profane vision"¹⁶ (CL 208). It is "diabolically funny" and "emotionally exhausting" (CL 208). In other words, *Carnovsky* is portrayed as a work that challenges identity frameworks, and hence, is a dangerous and threatening tool.

Carnovsky also blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction,¹⁷ pushing the readers to ask the following question: "is it fiction?" (CL 208). According to Henry Zuckerman, while "some novelists use style to define the distance" among the reader, writer and the work, *Carnovsky* uses style in order to "collapse the distance" (CL 208). This shows how the fictitious novel is another self-aware literary work thinking on the ways of thinking about identity and belonging. Here, collapsing the distance refers to the novel's potential and capacity to ridicule all aspects of solid interpretations of belonging and identity. What is more, as in the other literary works mentioned above, the fictitious literary work *Carnovsky*, and its author Nathan Zuckerman, are accused of "us[ing] his life as if it belonged to somebody else," "plundering history" and using "verbal memory like a vicious thief" (CL 209). *Carnovsky*, then, is "betrayal of mother love" (CL 209), implying that the literary work has no respect for any orthodoxies or filial relationships in the Saidian sense.¹⁸ The metafictional agenda of the fictitious novel is once again emphasized: it "is so clear on the various forms it can take" and "so accurate about the caveman mentality of those urban peasant Jews" "partaking the omnipotence" of 'Gods' "through the conviction of Jewish superiority"¹⁹ (CL 209). In the Gloucestershire chapter, *Carnovsky* is defined as a "good anthropologist" who "lets the experience of the little tribe,²⁰ the suffering, isolated, primitive but warmhearted savages that he is studying, emerge in the description of their rituals and their artifacts and their conversations, and he²¹ manages, "to put his own 'civilization,' his own bias as a reporter—and his readers'—into relief against them" (CL 209). Expressly, *Carnovsky* understands its own community very well, and it is blind to all hierarchical categories of belonging that reduce identity to a set of practices and traditions, which is its own bias.

In the description of the fictitious work and its author, the disturbing and inquisitive nature of Carnovsky is emphasized by articulating that the work “breaks fresh ground in the territory of transgression by writing so explicitly about the sexuality of family life”²² (CL 209-210). The “fact” that Carnovsky was elevated to the “status of a classic” drives Henry mad, because Henry hates the work in question for ridiculing his new but Orthodox identity (CL 213). The new and the orthodox is an oxymoron: here, the shifting narrative makes the Orthodox Jewish identity something new, a great example of Roth’s ironic literary approach to belonging.²³ At one point, self-reflexivity and hatred of the fictitious literary work Carnovsky merge, and Henry utters the following: “Carnovsky wasn’t fiction, it was never fiction—the fiction and the man were one! Calling it fiction was the biggest fiction of all!” (CL 227). It is worth noting that here the novel urges readers to ask the same question asked by the fictitious readers of Carnovsky: ‘is it fiction?’ Philip Roth’s metafiction makes the distinction between fact and fiction deliberately quite unclear. By continuously pushing their readers to feel doubtful and skeptical about the fictionality of identities in their works, Roth incorporates this distinctive function of metafiction into his novel.

If there are no irreducible core values of an identity, what else does one have? What is Roth’s perspective concerning claim(s) to an identity? Once more, the answer of this question is provided by the formal/metafictional capacity of Roth’s work. For Nathan Zuckerman, Roth’s novel, or Roth as a writer, there is no irreducible or irreplaceable norm, standard, or element. Instead, there is always a factor of self-questioning, or “doubt”, as Cooper puts it (216). Roth’s work provides this answer in the following way: in the first chapter, Nathan Zuckerman has an important task: he has to write a eulogy for his brother, who has just died after heart surgery. The task at hand is to create and present an identity, and the undertaker is a writer.²⁴ Nathan first goes through his notes/manuscript on Henry (CL 22), and reads the following lines: “Here the ending began,²⁵ with as commonplace and unoriginal an adventure as this—with the ancient experience of carnal revelation” (CL 23). The foreshadowing in the manuscript implies that all the subsequent chapters, all of the alternative narratives are born out of the imagination of the fictitious author Nathan Zuckerman. After going through the notes accumulated over the years, Nathan decides that this text does not fit the expectations of a formal funeral eulogy (CL 13-14), as the text is “imposing Nathan’s values and assumptions about that life” (Cooper 216). Expressly, Nathan cannot decide to what extent it is the real Henry, or whether it is some other Henry of the writer’s imagination.²⁶

This is where the fictitious author Nathan Zuckerman decides to play the game of metafiction: all of the following chapters are the product of a complicated mind-game, in which alternate selves, other identities, and disparate personifications of the fictitious author’s imagination appear. Such a self-reflexive text serves three purposes: first, as discussed above, the complex metafiction distorts the distinction between fact and fiction. Second, the novel emphasizes the textuality or fictionality of all identities.

Like imagined communities, individuals and their multiple belongings are fictitious. Third, *The Counterlife* rejects any understanding that reduces Jewishness or any other identity to a set of performances. For this reason, the next section of this chapter will discuss Roth’s approach to the relationship between performance and identity.

THE MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE GRAMMAR IN/OF THE NATION-STATE: THE DUALITY OF US VS. THEM

Roth’s work draws attention to a significant problem: how modern nation-states and their dominant identities are based on the principle of exclusion or exclusivity. By their nature, all of the dominant groups formed in the nation-state lead the community to the inevitable consequence of labeling, limiting, and/or finally excluding the ones who do not fit. Roth’s novel specifically focuses on this characteristic of the nation-state, as individuals and groups continuously lay claim to the identity while excluding others. This process reaches a point in which all communication comes to a halt. All of the characters live in their own worlds, stick to their own values, and try to force a specific, defined, and exclusionary identity onto the others. In the end, all the parties end up living in their own bubble of ideology. The exclusivist politics of the nation-state and the lack of meaningful communication among involved parties are not only expressed through inter-character conflicts (the content), but also revealed through the form of the novel, its metafiction. In summary, in this section, I will first briefly discuss the politics of exclusivism, and analyze Roth’s perspective on it.

Political exclusivism frequently appears as one of the core values of nationalism. Exclusive politics or exclusivism is the opposite of political accommodationism. As Ilan Peleg explains, this dichotomy of exclusivism and accommodationism²⁷ depends on other “tensions” or “dichotomies,” such as “nationalism and democracy²⁸ as political forces in deeply divided societies” and “the relationships that exist between the dominant majority and a dominated minority” (45). Peleg explains that the existence of deep conflicts can be observed when “hegemonic regimes [are] dedicated to the promotion of the interests of one and only one ethnic group ... which exasperates the tensions” between nationalism and democracy (45). Peleg’s focus here is on deeply divided societies with historical conflicts. Note how he directly compares democracy to nationalism: Peleg shows that nationalisms are frequently based on certain values that keep citizens together. Nevertheless, each definition innately rules out many other options, identities, and differences. Peleg argues that nationalism usually is opposed to inclusive and egalitarian democratic structures. This connection becomes more apparent later in the same chapter, when he writes, “there is an intimate link between accommodation and democracy, just as there is a link between exclusivist hegemonic conditions or non-democracy” (47). One of the prominent reasons for this common political clash is shown to be ethnocentrism (Peleg 46) in multicultural and multi-ethnic communities. Mila Dragojević similarly explains that the concept of homeland, being a version of ethnocentrism, often creates “tight-knit

networks" leading not only to the exclusion of other forms of identities, but also to certain "political instability" (22) in the long run. In short, the matter is a problem of homogeneity vs. diversity in nationalisms.

Peleg's and Dragojević's perspectives are equally echoed in Benedict Anderson's nationalism and nation-state theory. Anderson puts the exclusionary politics in historical context and shows, for instance, how Catholics were excluded from public posts in 19th-century England, which arguably contributed to Irish nationalism (*Imagined Communities* 56). Similarly, Anderson writes, it was "nearly unheard" for a Créole to hold an important official position in 19th-century Spain (*Imagined Communities* 57). The reason for such a political exclusion is explained in terms of differences in geographical and racial origins: one could not be born in the Americas and be an authentic Spaniard (*Imagined Communities* 58). Anderson, very interestingly, touches on the political and psychological justification of religio-nationalist exclusivism since the 19th century. He states that the concepts of "biological and ecological contamination" merge with European expansionism since the 16th century, and a result, postulates that "American Créoles, with their ever-growing numbers and increasing local rootedness with each succeeding generation, presented a historically unique political problem" (*Imagined Communities* 58). Similar examples can be found in Anderson's theory of nationalism (*Imagined Communities* 101, 172) regarding how one dominant group suppresses other groups that do not fit into the dominant ideology.

All these theoretical examples demonstrate the nature of official nationalism in Anderson's terminology. As Peleg and Dragojević argue, what is at play here is the ethnocentric perspective of official nationalism. Anderson defines this as "an anticipatory strategy adopted by dominant groups which are threatened with marginalization or exclusion from an emerging nationally imagined community" (*Imagined Communities* 101). In this regard, the exclusion and marginalization of identities other than the dominant one are frequent in imagined communities (*Imagined Communities* 109-110).

How does exclusionary identity politics relate to Philip Roth's fiction? It is no coincidence that *The Counterlife* pays particular attention to mutually exclusive dialogues, in which the homeland clashes with the Diaspora, the American Jew is insulted by the Israeli Jew, and a politically hawkish Orthodox Jew looks down on a politically dove Jew. As Yarir Wallach writes, mutually exclusivist politics, and their divisive language have been extensively influential in Arab-Israeli relations (345). The characters in *The Counterlife* all suffer from this divisive grammar, and there is no meaningful communication among them. In the five chapters and with the shifting narrative structure, with a new story starting in each chapter, none of the characters sincerely listens to the others, agrees, learns something new, or changes his/her life accordingly. On the contrary, each character lives in his/her own private world, as everyone's priority is to impose his/her values on the other. Therefore, nothing productive is born of these frequent and unproductive conflicts. There are continuously heated dialogues, but

in the end, all the characters continue to survive in their own ways, and do not change.

The Henry Zuckerman of the first chapter is a well-off Jewish dentist who goes through a mid-life crisis with sexual impotence. When he survives the operation and the narrative restarts in chapter two, Henry makes aliyah,²⁹ leaving his family in Newark, New Jersey, beginning a new life as an Orthodox Jew, because he is resolved to be an "authentic Jew" (CL 74). Henry starts studying Hebrew and takes Mordecai Lippman as his mentor, who advocates violence to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict. Shuki, the "nicey" journalist, defines Lippman as a "psychopath alienated profoundly from the country's common sense and wholly marginal to its ordinary everyday life" (CL 116). The differences between Newark in the US and Agor in Israel, and, the profound change in the political climate, are nicely illustrated in the following passage, by Shuki:

The American Jews get a big thrill from the guns. They see Jews walking around with guns and they think they're in paradise. Reasonable people with a civilized repugnance for violence and blood, they come on tour from America, and they see the guns and they see the beards, and they take leave of their senses. The beards remind them of saintly Yiddish weakness and the guns to reassure them of heroic Hebrew force. Jews ignorant of history, Hebrew, Bible, ignorant of Islam and the Middle East, they see the guns and they see the beards, and out of them flows every sentimental emotion that wish fulfillment can produce. A regular pudding of emotions. The fantasies about this place make me sick. And what about the beards? Is your brother as thrilled by the religion as by the explosives? (CL 75)

This passage touches on several significant issues related to religio-national exclusivism. First is the ethnocentrism mentioned at the beginning of this section. The American Jews who come to Agor in Israel take on a violent life based on identity, and Shuki's description shows that, given the choice between civilization and violence, they choose the latter. Second, the tone, the repetition of certain words, and the speed of this speech successfully reveal the exuberance of the Jews coming to Israel: the excitement of claiming an ancient identity definitely moves many people. Furthermore, belonging and being a part of such an ancient community in the modern world provides a deeper and more influential meaning to individuals' lives. In this regard, people are influenced by their emotions, rather than their minds, as they become ignorant of their history, themselves, and their counterparts. This, of course, is one main source of conflict. Third, this passage is one of the many examples of the connection between identity and performance discussed in the previous chapter. The beard and the gun³⁰ become the performative symbols of assertion of identity, and thus are the representative signs of a more important position in the hierarchical structure. Having the gun and the beard becomes one and the same, as being a better and authentic Jew compared to a Diaspora Jew, and a much better human being than the counterpart, an Arab. This brings us to the fourth step in the exclusivist religio-national language: power is the one and the main way to claim identity. This is why the gun is so cen-

tral to the discourse of Lippman and his followers. What is more, this is also the reason that Philip Roth uses the trope of impotence in *The Counterlife*. In so doing, Roth locates the alternative ways of looking at the exclusivist identity politics and their impasse. Fifth, the regressive claim³¹ to an ancient identity (from being a modern American Jew, to an ancient and authentic Judean Jew)³² resembles to Anderson's theory on nationalism, as the Israeli Jews like Lippman or Henry all claim a timeless or ancient identity. This ancient and timeless identity is somehow much more attractive than Nathan's loose and secular understanding of American Jewishness. Lastly, the ancient identity Lippman and Henry claim is paradoxically a modern and national one. In addition, following Anderson, the identity Henry claims is at least as imaginary and real as the narratives of Philip Roth. The identity is imagined, but the consequences of its politics and its exclusivism are real.

The Counterlife explores and harshly criticizes the exclusivist language of the nation-state not only through its characters, but also through its form. The novel's metafiction achieves this in two additional³³ ways. The first is through the frequent use of letters in the novel. For instance, one correspondence takes place in Chapter Two, between Shuki and Nathan. Another letter by Nathan is addressed to Henry in Chapter Three. And later, in the last chapter, there is an exchange of letters between Jewish Nathan Zuckerman and British Maria. The common element in all these letters is that they function as the novel's formal expressions of the impossibility of meaningful conversations between two parties in conflict. In one sense, the letters are formally the exact opposites of the heated conversations shown above. Instead, they are but one-sided soliloquies. This is what us/them grammar in the title of this section refers to. The letters are not always answered, and some of them are written, but may not have even been sent. The narrative leaves all these in suspense, in a formal expression of lack of communication.

Another piece of textual evidence showing the plight of exclusivism and its divisive structure is the representation of Arabs in the Judea chapter. In a literary work, the absence (of a character or idea) is at least as important as its presence. Not only in this chapter but in the whole book, Arabs are just mentioned, but no Arab character participates in dialogue. When Arabs are mentioned, let us say, regarding Israel's foreign politics, it is in hostile language. Shimmy recommends to "Bomb 'em," and to "bomb the Arab bastards till they cry uncle" (CL 38). Elsewhere, an Arab is mentioned only as "a threat posed to the State of Israel" (CL 103), or as the source of some local "disturbances" (CL 105). Henry claims that Arabs "don't respect niceness" and "what an Arab respects is power" (CL 106). According to him, Arabs laugh at Jews "[i]n winter, because [Jews] are exposed to the wind and cold, in the summer to heat and the sun," while Arabs are, "protected from the worst of the weather" (CL 114). It is possible to find more of these similar examples in *The Counterlife*.

What Roth's novel is doing is not arguing that all the Jews are intolerant and the victims of regressive nationalist politics, in the sense explained by Kearney. Such a claim would be a serious misreading and misunderstanding of

Roth's clever use of metafiction. On the contrary, his self-reflexivity manages to look into one's culture from the outside and show the shortcomings of the religio-nationalist structure. Roth's work cannot be considered as an attack on Jewishness,³⁴ but his fiction does attack the divisive, exclusivist grammar of nationalism. This is one specific reason why Roth's fiction places individual identity over collective identity through the narrative shifts. Through self-reflexivity, Roth's literary perspective shows that Jewish identity is not a uniform entity.

CONCLUSION: METAFICTION, IDENTITY, AND THE NATION-STATE IN *THE COUNTERLIFE*

Philip Roth's *The Counterlife* asks bold questions about Jewishness, secularism, identity, and belonging in the nation-state. What does it mean to be "a Jew without Jews?" (324) How can one be a Jew "without Judaism, without Zionism, without Jewishness, without a temple or an army or even a pistol?" (CL 324). Is it ever possible to be a Jew without a home, just the object itself?" (CL 324). In addition to these direct questions, Roth also asks indirect questions through, for instance, an unexpected decision of his fictional writer: What does it mean for the "secular" (CL 41, 89, 112, 124, 143, 218) Nathan Zuckerman to decide to have his unborn child circumcised?³⁵ (CL 324). What does this decision have to do with identity?

These are all quite challenging questions. Roth provides several answers in a way that fits the pluralist spirit of the novel. He answers them both formally, that is, the answers are implicit in the metafictional structure of the novel, and he also answers them through the heated dialogues among his colorful Jewish characters from various socio-political backgrounds and opinions. It must also be noted that Philip Roth's fiction does not shy away from getting into dialogue with the themes of nationalism and secularism. This makes *The Counterlife* a novel that contributes to the theory of belonging through a literary perspective.

The Counterlife confronts theories of nationalism that define the nation as unitary, unisonant or uniform, expressly refuting Benedict Anderson's theory of nationalism through a literary perspective. What does it mean to refute a theory from a literary perspective? To answer this question, I will break down the principal definition of nationalism by Anderson, and analyze how Roth's fiction perceives and portrays it.

Anderson defines the nation as "a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous time" (Imagined Communities 26). His first assumption is that the nation is an organism, a living thing. One, unified and coherent thing. Like Homi Bhabha, who writes that culture can be understood only through its temporality (Nation and Narration 2), Roth's fiction rejects Anderson's view. Through metafiction, that is, the shifting narrative, and by pushing the reader to experience the same or similar events through diverse perspectives and disturbingly different conclusions, *The Counterlife* shows that it can only be naive to expect any sort of uniformity in today's complex and multicultural communities.

There is a major difference between the way that theory and literature approach problems of identity and belonging in the nation-state. Foremost is their scale. Theorists like Benedict Anderson study the nation at a larger, societal level. Such a perspective pursues the development of the nation based on communities, not on individuals. However, *The Counterlife* formally shows that the novel is interested in the individual perspective, as opposed to the collective one. As evidence for this thesis, each chapter presents a different individual perspective in conflict with the collective identity and/or the national agenda.³⁶ It seems safe to assert that Philip Roth's fiction provides a response to one need of theory: as the first chapter of this study explains, Eric Hobsbawm calls for different methods for studying and understanding the nation. He writes that one cannot understand the nation "unless [the nation is] also analysed from below,³⁷ that is, in terms of the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people, which are not necessarily national and still less nationalist" (10). This is exactly what Roth's novel is doing: *The Counterlife* is both a response to Hobsbawm's call, and a meaningful contribution to the theory of identity and the nation-state.

Another clash point in the dialogue between Anderson's theory and Roth's fiction is over the idea of homogeneous-empty-time. Roth's fiction clearly refutes the theory that the time of the nation-state is homogeneous and empty. First, there is not just one single time, as Bhabha explains. Instead, there is a multiplicity of time(s), at least as many as the number of people who experience, shape, and re-shape them. This idea is formally expressed in *The Counterlife* by resetting the clock (or the novel's time) at the beginning of each chapter, and presenting the reader with a new situation, climax, and resolution each time. Second, Anderson's idea of homogeneous-empty-time is built on the strong assumption that religion has been mostly, if not totally, replaced by the secular structure of the nation-state. As stated in the first paragraph of this section, the secularity or secularism of the fictional writer Nathan Zuckerman is emphasized repeatedly throughout the novel. However, in all of the chapters, he is somehow in conflict with other characters, and this conflict is always related to religion or the application of religious ideals to everyday life.³⁸ All these confrontations strongly demonstrate two things: first, time in the nation-state is not "empty." Instead, it is full of both religious and secular views, as represented by angry dialogues particularly in the Judea chapter. Secondly, the nation-state is not a secular entity; it is rather a space of conflict for the religious and the secular.

Lastly, what does it mean for Roth to have his fictional author Nathan Zuckerman, as a secular Jew, decide to have his unborn baby circumcised at birth? How does Nathan Zuckerman relate the removal of his child's foreskin to the discussion of belonging? On the one hand, the act of circumcision is "quintessentially Jewish, and the mark of their³⁹ reality" (CL 323), and on the other hand, it is Nathan's clear expression that it was not "his intention" to have the circumcision performed on his child, as it was "ir-

relevant to [his] 'I'" (CL 324). The religious and the secular choices make themselves more visible and pressing through the demands and expectations of other characters,⁴⁰ too.

Before explaining Nathan's decision, I would like to underline two things. First, such a decision is made for the unborn baby. This adds another layer to the metafiction, and Philip Roth shows in this way that the collective identities of the nation-state start shaping us even before we are born into this world. Additionally, the identity continues (or is continued) on maleness, on a specific performance on the penis. Second, a fin-de-siècle Roth completes his novel with the same sexual imagery: the impotence of both Henry and Nathan provide Roth the means to discuss belonging and identity as a matter of power. Now the novel finishes with Nathan's decision to have the baby circumcised, and Nathan says he finds it "fitting to conclude with ... the circumcised erection of the Jewish father" (CL 324). Circumcision, sexuality, power, and identity: they are all forms of performativity determining identity. Still, what is Roth's point?

Philip Roth has a reasonably negative view of nationalism. What pushed Nathan to take the decision to have his baby circumcised is the mutually exclusive language and racism in the nation-state, as observed in his statement that "England's made a Jew of me in only eight weeks"⁴¹ (CL 324). Nathan, who had been accused of parricide several times in the novel (in the sense of disrespecting the traditions of the previous generation), now fails to do the same thing as a secular Jew, when it comes to choosing against circumcision. On the contrary, Nathan simply re-asserts the power and the Jewish identity he had lost at the beginning of the novel. Ironically, the book is dedicated to his father. In short, neither Nathan Zuckerman, nor Philip Roth has a positive view of the nation-state. Yet, if there is one point on which Nathan Zuckerman and Philip Roth agree with Benedict Anderson, it would be that the nation-state is here to stay, in spite of all of its conflicts, exclusivity and power-based identity politics.

It would be an injustice to over-emphasize the negative tone of *The Counterlife*, as the novel has a very playful, ironical, and entertaining tone in its discussion of secularism, identity, Jewishness and the nation-state. In spite of the intrinsic pessimism, there is also a fresh and hopeful perspective in the novel, which is clearly articulated by Nathan Zuckerman. He says that "[A]ll I can tell you with certainty that I, for one, have no self,⁴² and that I am unwilling or unable to perpetrate upon myself the joke of a self. It certainly does strike me as a joke about my self" (CL 320-321). In *Up Society's Ass*, Mark Shechner comments on this short but striking passage that "Roth has not settled with Jewishness yet, and it is likely he never will" (119). This is exactly what makes Roth's fiction hopeful in tone: its indeterminacy on identities, its skepticism in regard to uniformity, its openness to alternative selves, its ability to look at itself from the outside, and its awareness of temporalities. All in all, Roth's *The Counterlife* offers a distinct literary perspective on identity and belonging in the nation-state in general, and from a Jewish context in particular.

ENDNOTES

1. Non-Jew woman in derogatory language. Henry dreams of escaping his Jewish life by marrying "Teutonic" and hence exotic Maria (CL 12).
2. In Roth's fiction, it is implied that there is a strong connection between sexual power/impotence and nationalism.
3. Forgetting is a central term in Benedict Anderson's nation-state theory.
4. Nathan and Maria not only talk about the past, but also their future. Continuing the sexual imagery and its connection to identity politics in the nation-state, they cannot agree on the circumcision plans the unborn baby, and the novel ends with Nathan Zuckerman's rather pessimistic closing remarks. More on this in the following sections of this chapter.
5. Author's emphasis.
6. In Zuckerman Unbound, the fictitious author Nathan Zuckerman defines his fictitious novel Carnovsky as "a book ostensibly about someone else attempting to break free from his accustomed restraints" and "a book about 'onanism in Jewish New Jersey'" (qtd. in Stade).
7. Roth sees a very strong connection between writing and the creation of identities in the nation-state. In this regard, Roth seems to be very similar to Benedict Anderson, but politically, they are at two extreme ends. On the one hand is Anderson, who writes that writing, the novel or print-capitalism helped create a unisonant identity in a relatively secular nation-state. And on the other end of the spectrum is Philip Roth, who employs writing and the novel to show that identities are never uniform or unisonant, and that there is no real secular topos in the nation-state. In the following part, I also show that Roth's fiction gets very close to the identity theory of Homi Bhabha, while moving further from Anderson.
8. Author's emphasis.
9. The state here refers to the state analyzed in Benedict Anderson's work. To understand this, see Anderson's chapter on the census, map and the museum. In Anderson's words, the tools of the state are "...census's abstract quantification/serialization of persons, the map's eventual logoization of political space, and the museum's 'ecumenical,' profane genealogizing..." (Imagined Communities xiv).
10. Jews that immigrate to Israel. This immigration is accepted as one of the principles of Zionism. Henry's travel to Agor/West Bank in the second chapter of *The Counterlife* is such a choice, and the novel has an ironic tone, on the basis that it is nourished by and nurtures exclusivist identity politics.
11. Philip Roth alludes to the work of linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, whose theory claims that the relationship between the sound and the meaning, or the sign and the signified, is mostly arbitrary. To be more specific, what gives a specific meaning and content to a concept in Saussure's understanding is "social convention" (Elder-Vass 93).
12. The state of Israel.
13. Nathan Zuckerman's justification for refusing to read his eulogy of Henry stems from his doubt. Nathan simply cannot decide whether it is the real Henry in the eulogy, or another Henry he made up as a writer. This distinction is very important, as Nathan starts his "what if" style metafictional-writing right after this point. This chapter includes related quotations and discussion on this topic in the following pages.
14. One of the many Henrys: this is the Henry in the fictitious author Nathan's fictitious book. In short, his life is one of the many fictions. This is how Roth's novel emphasizes the constructedness and temporality of identities.
15. The allusion to the Jewish family, and hence to Jewishness is clear. Through the fictitious novel, Philip Roth brings the act of writing and identity-making processes under the spotlight. Another theme that Roth repeats here is the theme of attack on the writer and writing, as explained in this chapter. As Benedict Anderson explains, the role of writing (novels, newspapers) in the process of nation-making is critical. In this regard, Carnovsky is another metafictional trick of Roth to bring this issue forward.
16. The secularity or secularism of Jewish Nathan Zuckerman is one of the themes in the novel (CL 41, 89, 112, 124, 143, 218). As the title of the novel suggests, the definition of Jewishness, where and how to live in the nation states are some of the main clash points.
17. Roth's fictitious novel blurs the boundary in the duality of fact and fiction. In doing so, the novel brings writing to the very center, and shows readers how the borders get vague through metafiction in identity issues within nation-states.
18. In his "Secular Criticism" in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Edward Said makes a distinction between "filiation" and "affiliation," stating that the secular critic should be alert to all sources of legitimacy (24). "Birth, nationality, profession" are filial ties, whereas "social and political conviction, economic and historical circumstances, voluntary effort and willed deliberation" are ties of affiliation (25). The secular critic's role, for Said, is to keep a distance, to "stand between the culture and the system," (26) never fully belonging in either. This is what Nathan Zuckerman is literally doing.
19. At this point, Roth's *The Counterlife* ironically touches on all sorts of fundamentalist definitions of Jewishness, as personified by Henry Zuckerman in the second chapter, as well as characters like Mordecai Lippman.
20. Allusion is to all the Jews in the world, no matter whether they are Diaspora or not, or what nation-state they live in.
21. Nathan Zuckerman, as the fictitious author of Carnovsky.
22. Roth's novel, *The Counterlife* establishes a parallel among formation, power, and sexuality. This is the exact reason of having the theme of sexual impotence. Both Henry and Nathan suffer from impotence, and the theme is a metafictional trick of the novel to discuss the religious and ethnic belonging and identity issues in the

- nation state. More will be discussed on this, in the following pages.
23. Roth's allusion here is to Zionism, as a relatively recent national movement since the 19th century. What is implied here is that Zionism is a nationalist idea relatively new in the long Jewish history, but characters like Lippman suppose that it is the only and true way of being a Jew.
 24. Note the connection between writing and identity-making, as discussed in the context of Benedict Anderson's nation-state theory in the first chapter.
 25. Emphasis mine.
 26. The following passage is directly related to this theme in *The Counterlife*: "We are all the invention of each other, everybody a conjuration conjuring up everyone else. We are all each other's authors." (146) The tropes of writing and writer are analyzed in the following sections in this chapter.
 27. Peleg definitely sees an opposition between nationalism and democracy, as he defines class as a "dilemma," in addition to a "dichotomy" (39).
 28. Emphasis mine.
 29. Return to Israel.
 30. These images add up to the novel's connection between manhood and nationalism.
 31. Regressive nationalism is a term widely discussed. According to Richard Kearney, it usually appears when the progress of a nation is allegedly interrupted by some other hegemony. In this case, the nation creates a scapegoat, very harsh exclusionary politics and an ancient identity to claim. According to Kearney, regressive nationalism is also "depressive nationalism" (184). Roth clearly alludes to this concept in *The Counterlife*. For instance, Lippman defines Israel as an "... unfinished, other-terrestrial landscape, attesting theatrically at sunset to Timeless Significance, [where] one might well imagine self-renewal on the grandest scale of all, the legendary scale, the scale of mythic heroism" (CL 113).
 32. The name of the second chapter is Judea. Roth is well aware of the conflict between modern and ancient forms of Jewish identities, and the general interest in the latter. This is why he does not name the chapter as 'Agor' or 'The West Bank.'
 33. The first is the shifting narrative structure, but it is not mentioned again to avoid repetition.
 34. Roth's fiction is usually a few steps beyond the reader. He knows that his fiction will be criticized with such misguided attacks. For instance, in one letter exchange between Shuki and Nathan (both are writers), Shuki blames Nathan for not understanding the consequences of his writing. He says: "the consequences of what you write are real" (CL 162). Nathan's replies to this letter with another, ironically stating that he does not think that his fiction would "alter Jewish history" (CL 163).
 35. See the related passage of Nathan Zuckerman, when he decides to have his child circumcised. Note how he changes his mind: "Only a few hours ago, I went so far as to tell Shuki Elchanan that the custom of circumci-
- sion was probably irrelevant to my "I." Well, it turns out to be easier to take that line on Dizengoff Street than sitting here beside the Thames. A Jew among Gentiles and a Gentile among Jews. Here it turns out, by my emotional logic, to be the number-one priority. Aided by your sister, your mother, and even by you, I find myself in a situation that has reactivated the strong sense of difference that had all but atrophied in New York, and, what's more, that has drained the domestic idyll of its few remaining drops of fantasy. Circumcision confirms that there is an us, and an us that isn't solely him and me" (CL 324). Emphasis mine.
 36. I borrow the term from Homi Bhabha. See the previous section.
 37. Emphasis mine.
 38. The clash between Henry and Nathan, Henry's aliyah to Agor, conversations between Lippman and Nathan, crazy Jimmy's plane incident, British racism against Jewish Nathan in England, or the clash between Maria and Nathan on circumcising the baby are some of the many examples of this sort. In all of these, religion or religious beliefs play a significant role.
 39. Emphasis mine. 'Their' refers to Jews. 'Nathan Zuckerman does not define himself as a member of a Jewish group in this statement. At least, it can be stated that he is looking at Jewishness from the outside.
 40. Nathan's prospective wife Maria and her British family are against this Jewish custom, and they object to the circumcision.
 41. Nathan refers to Chapter 4, Gloucestershire, where he met different forms of British racism against Jews.
 42. Emphasis in original.

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