

**Re-Constructions of the Jewish Psyche in the
Autobiographical Works of Philip Roth and S. Y. Abramovitch**

By
Kim Bistrong

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Of Bygone Days and *The Facts* are as much explorations of the autobiographical impulses of its writers as they are the realizations of them. Each work is fueled by the need to understand the origin, not of the species -- who have been well observed, documented and preserved by the authors -- but of the self -- the self as living, breathing consciousness; a repository for, and personification, personifier and judge of, the accumulated effects of the "insipid" tribal customs and communal ceremonies imposed upon the writers in their formative years.

These autobiographies result from the authors' quests for that distant moment immediately preceding distinction. While the need to put such things as hate, desire and lust on public display is yet another mark distinguishing our "self-hating" Jewish artists, our he-who-is-not-born-to-be-a-dentist-or-an-accountant, their creative expressions provide a reliable vehicle for exploring those *abhorrent* themes that have been so curiously the cause of so much grief among the writers' most vociferous critics.

While there is no pretense for offering up "the facts" to us -- nor is there in the "duty" of writing these reflections exclusively for the self -- each writer provides us with a feasible enough justification for the launch. For Roth, it is less to display actual goodness -- since we are inclined to "judge morally the author of an autobiography," than to understand what happened to him -- what induced his breakdown; to reflect upon the Philip *and* the Roth and on how, at fifty-five, he might better cope with life, particularly in light of the inexplicable loss of his mother and the pending one of his father. For Reb Shloyme, the inquiry into the self will require that he return to the "small world" of his

youth - before he was "a somebody" in "comfortable circumstances" - a return to the primal scene where "the pomegranate doesn't blossom;" a return to his "fearful and altogether unenlightened" people and their backward ways in the *shtetl*. In order to retrace his steps he needs once again to explore and expose the life that persists there - the life that insists on re-rooting itself in fetid grounds. Perhaps he will discover its unique stabilizing force; an artifact reminding him of the "authentic value" of his custom. But is to devote oneself to the past to be "oblivious to the present?" What are the implications of our artists "still on the Jewish stuff?" Still, our authors return to their respective locales of personal enlightenment. For Reb Shloyme it is the storm -- where human intelligence was revealed to him, where lightening ignited the flame in the "heart of a naïve child," and where he was subsequently introduced to bewilderment and shame. For Roth it happened *away*, more specifically for the purposes of his autobiography, in the outstretched arms of *l'amour fou*.

These works are charged with an urgency less to change direction than to shift gear; to "remind" of the past and keep from "sin;" to at once undo the damage of infliction and unmask the inflictor. "Whoever has the whip in hand uses it, and never stops to think that his own back was beaten just yesterday, and with the same weapon," Mendele reminds Shloyme. For each writer it is the primacy of communal life and the sovereignty of the tribal bond that informs the investigation; the communities from which they emerged, those that enslaved them to their own rage and fury are, once again, on trial. Well equipped with the "persuasive hypothesis" that might unravel the "history's meaning," the investigators return to the scene of the crime; and although the investigation continues, the questions, alas, have changed.

What young Shloyme discovered in the storm, Roth discovered *away*. The subjects of the autobiographies are tempered by the fragility of their circumstance, i.e., their indelible inscription in their bearer's psyches. Abramovitsh is "bitter...warn by hard experience," and Roth is emerging from a crackup. Nevertheless, they cordially invite us to chronicle with them not the events, but their effects, not to gratify our insatiable appetites for knowledge about the writers, but to stir them.

Reb Shloyme is inspired to investigate Jewish heritage just at a time when most Jews would have traded in their noses for a bit of anonymity. Roth, perhaps a bit exhausted from so many years of crafting ridicule, and what's worse in an arena in which Gentiles are engaged, softens the blow by finally putting *anti-Semitism* under the microscope (and himself, but only insofar as his life, as presented in *The Facts*, is a series of responses to a collective fear - and thereby personal lure and eroticisation - of the Gentile, as this fear was imposed upon him in his youth). Against his inclination to mull over a featureless condition, lacking in "those colorful details that grace a story and whet the reader's appetite and in which nothing really exciting happens," Abramovitsh launches into an explorative testimony of the Jewish customs of his youth, their demarcations of Good and Evil (and the indelibility of their distinction on his consciousness), and ultimately of the Jewish trajectory of that specific socio-historic period until the first installment of *Of Bygone Days*; from storm to storm, as it were. In *The Facts*, our Roth places at center stage all that was exciting in what he otherwise would have characterized as a dull life inhabited solely by he and his typewriter.

The bitterness of life, one of the distinguishing features and the “most important ingredient” of the Jewish experience to which Reb Shloyme must return, is not lost on Roth. Substantial or not, the *panic* if not immediately present, is always looming; for a Jew “there’s no difference between one panic and another...who could even remember them all?” Decades of enslavement to the *fear* of the Gentile, of God, of *what would be if we caused a stir*, the “fanatical security, fanatical insecurity” comprising the Jewish drama, blinds the individual and robs him of his capacity for differentiation. The storage house for the repression of such fears, Roth is incapable of acting outside of the curiosities about, and resentments against, their source. Fanatically secure, Roth becomes enslaved to Josie’s own sense of victimization. As his nemesis, his Other to his other -- and consequently his own -- *his* storm, his *away*, Josie is Roth’s “*tfui*” to all of the known and unknown ancestors warning him against her -- the *shiksa witch* -- and ultimately, his concession that they may have been right. “Frightened of appearing heartless in the face of her unrelenting need and everything that was owed to her,” Roth challenges the laws governing the earliest stages of development. In one stroke he testifies to his malehood, defies the legacy of Jewishhood, and affirms Americanhood -- Joe College meets the Girl of His Dreams: and Now Vee May Perhaps to Begin.

The talent for mimicry and demonstrative wit exhibited in the “boyish pranks” of our subjects eventually yielded to a more assiduous study of people and a consequent science of ridicule. Their youthful uncharitable ways of identifying weaknesses in those around them and mocking them, once perhaps impressive, gave way to what was ultimately a lifelong engagement with them; desiccating, resuscitating, reviving their distinct physical, psychological, socio-historic characteristics - void of any meaning

outside the author's narcissistic rendering of them. The potential scholar in Israel and the New York lawyer with the "gift of the gab" had as yet not posed any threat. Through these fictionalized accounts we come to understand Roth's and Abramovitch's subjects as unleashed spirits, leading a revolt from without while embroiled in the constant push - pull between past and present that characterized their childhoods.

Like all the other little Shloymes, our young Shloymele was ignorant to a "normal existence" – a visitor to the mundane world, his life was "one of continuous memorialization, commemorating the lives of [our] ancestors;" – life was a dream. "And since life was a dream, small wonder that chimeras and superstitions assumed a real existence." (304) And the more that the fear of the unknown haunted him, the more he sought security in those artifacts created for his protection. For Roth, this translated into a fetishization of the unknown and a disregard for the faculties of defense.

In the home, *evil* was always lurking, necessitating a litany of "god forbids" to shun it and to no less condemn the natural yearnings of youth. This atmosphere, or vacuum, or "detention house" through which Roth was most probably "tunneling out of practically from the day [he] could pronounce [his] favorite word of all, *away*," (173) defined the Jewish home of young Roth and young Shloyme every bit as much as the predictability of a challah on Shabbat and – eventually the aromatherapeutic -- tomato soup at lunchtime.

For Reb Shloyme the autobiographical adventure is induced by the inevitable resolution to record for posterity Jewish life in the shtetl. He does not miss out however,

on the opportunity to pique our curiosity about his musings by infusing his memoirs with cynicisms about contemporary Jewish life and many of his Jewish contemporaries. He and Roth know their audience, each writer having undergone a series of excommunications by other writers, Jewish professionals, and, well, other Jews. Each writer demonstrates a gift for idealizing, ridiculing, condemning and defending the Jews and those institutions bearing the greatest weight on their lives through discreet jabs. From the corners, behind their unmasked meta-personae, they obscure the hurt, and whisk their vital blows: There was a time, Mendele remarks, “when the scholar was respected more than the rich man,” and people read texts that had, in his lifetime, become “almost a mystery.” (284) There was also a time when the idea of what we would today call a *multicultural* education, was not only not an option, but were it to become one, would have been “oi”-ed and “vey”-ed, and avoided at all costs – even if it meant “employ[ing] the trusty old device of marrying off their children” -- for fear it would mean the end of Judaism. The *cheders* were vital to the blood of all Jews. Institutions exclusive to Jewish learning (where the “strap got plenty of use”) provided the necessary nourishment for the soul of the Jewish future.

The deliverance from the *cheder*, and the home in Weequahic, into the enslaving arms of freedom, signaled new dawns and revealed great dreams for the young protagonists. For young Shloyme, release from the *cheder* amounted to a seduction by the forests. No longer relegated to the past, he could now direct his highly-developed skill for learning and reason towards assessing the new world around him. He discovered that there were pretty streets inhabited by Gentiles, and Jews who did not

study Talmud; as well, he discovered the presence of Satan within himself, forcing him to embrace again the distinction between Good and Evil.

The “Evil Impulse” would find for Shloyme no greater friends than Isaac the Blacksmith and Hertzl the Carpenter who, barely escaping banishment to the fringes of Jewish life by pillars of the community, helped to “keep alive in Shloyme’s heart the spark of childhood” -- though they were decades his senior. (330) The Evil Impulse would also introduce a defenseless Shloyme to his co-conspirator, Mendele Mokher Sforim, who would rule over him and cause him to tear off masks and to mock. This very spirit, Mendele the Bookpeddler, would talk him into writing his autobiography in order that he might again expose and ridicule; his best advocate, the cause of his ruin and his only solace...Mendele.

Away, Roth too encounters difference. However, as we know from his most austere critic, Nathan Zuckerman (the projection of Roth’s most *real* self – we think), there has been some foul play in its representation. Zuckerman puts Roth to the task of defending the road *not* taken in his autobiography: A personal account of an artist, written by himself, deplete of all imagination? *The* traverse between good and evil (no less definitive for young Shloyme) that, when overexposed, condemned him to a life in Exile with a typewriter and maybe a few fellow expatriates; *the* “transit between the good and the bad boy” that, when explored, provided the “tension” leading to the “revelations” of his past texts, completely absent from an *autobiography*, God forbid?

While Evil was seducing young Shloyme away from the “rigid, dusty world of learning,” and the grown-up “problems of ‘An Egg Laid on a Holiday,’” he was also having his way with little Philip at a disarmingly refined, albeit *treyf*, three course meal

introduced by a stew of dualities and deceits - to be washed down with “five ounces of bourbon” - followed by a simple crepe made with just a pinch of arrogance and more than a handful of nuts and destiny, and finishing with a choice of many years of supplication and destruction or a lifetime of insubordination and inconsolable isolation.

Shloyme’s interests intensified and he could no longer be held accountable for the life that had been preordained for him. Roth, at first bent on becoming more refined in a traditional American way, through his own moralized reflections and those expressed in great works of art, decided, instead, to take the Jewish world by storm through his own back door. This we know only by reference to the reception of some of his previous works and, thanks to God, by the comments made by Zuckerman in reference to Roth’s manuscript.

The Facts delights us with its constant teasing. Here we are at the keyhole, lured by the fantasies piqued by learning that *the* Philip Roth might finally divulge *his* life to *us* - his readership for whom the bottom line is always the bare facts anyway - maybe never again to be sutured into the foul meanderings of a self-hating Jewish adolescent mind that we no more think is very interesting than we do that it has been good for our image; the works, that is, that have constituted his oeuvre thus far. But noooo, here we are, on our knees, peeping through the hole, frustrated by his refusal to our right (rite!) of voyeuristic passage. His constant withholding keeps us here until we think we realize what is going on. So we wait, either for the attack or for the justification of it. But what do we find? Instead he is weeping, utterly defeated. Having finally fought *our* fight -- though he has

suffered temporary defeats -- he has demonstrated that he is actually on our side-- or is he? *Maybe the things that wear you down are also the things that nurture your talent.*

The Facts is a series of plans for and realizations of different levels of becomings; it is a recollection of awakenings, reckonings, letting go's, and mournings; a chronicling of the emotional responses to a family that is itself already a collective response to social and historical forces to which it is (or feels itself to be) subordinate. Roth probes at his "feelings" that result from a series of oppressive responses that were, although initiated by him, indubitably induced by the repressive norms to which he had been a victim; "always going back to his childhood," quips Maria. (188) At the same time, although he might overegg the custard a bit in his fictionalized pastoral account of the *inviolable* home of his youth, Roth commands our attention in his sympathetic portrayal of a family's all-consuming sense of eternal subordination to the un-negotiable relationship between Jew and Gentile -- inheritors of a legacy of the *angst* induced by living between two irreconcilable worlds -- the Jewish Diaspora and America.

With all of the manly-American-Jewishness he thinks he has mustered, Roth sets out to prove them wrong (offering new depths to the idea of the "revenge of the repressed"). Roth's crises ensue from his relentless (premeditated?) struggle to negotiate between his tribal bonds - the distinguishing features that are his legacy - and his American independence; perhaps Maria is right to doubt the motive for Zuckerman's beard, and doesn't she prove just how agile she is when she keenly observes that "only an American could see the fate of his freedom as the recurring theme of his life?" (189)

Through Josie, Roth could play anthropologist-cum-tribal-warrior-peacemaker. He could avenge his father's relentless struggle to climb up the ladder of success in one of the largest enterprises of the world, Metro Life, *the life that never failed*, the life and light of America; an international corporation unwilling – aside from a few token gestures - to find a better position for its Jewish employees. At the same time he could realize his own perverse eroticisation of the inverted structural relationships between and beyond the new lovers, spurred by *his* clever observations of them – what is more American than that? To his ancestors he would redeem the “moral barbarism” of the Russian and Polish peasantry; he would show his grandparents that Gentiles could be loved too. To the American prototypical girl-of-his-dreams he would prove that Jews were capable of the highest level of morality, family unity, pride, perseverance, alas, Americanism. In his relationship with Josie, the “inner resources of the Jews” would prevail over the “corrupting devices of the goyim” (83) The mission? To single-handedly “surmount the instinctive repugnance of my clan and prove myself superior to folk superstitions that enlightened, democratic spirits like me no longer had dignified need of in the heterogeneous U.S.A.” (84)

Roth is suspended between two worlds – he is a visitor in the Gentile world, and his work will not permit him to live outside the Jewish one. Roth, the writer, would vanish without the institutions, inspirations and condemnations provided by the Jews. Roth's decision to join Sammy's, rather than the Gentile fraternity Theta Chi, was ultimately quite predictable. With calculatable certainty, the process for Americanizing would mean overcoming the restrictions of being an ethnic minority in America through a creative process about which the Gentiles would understand nothing (and the Jews

would eventually take the opportunity to hate, praise, admonish and condemn). And, if he could find no new lunchroom in which to engage in class and ethnic intercourse as he could in Newark Colleges of Rutgers, he would do it in the bedrooms of genteel Pennsylvania, with Polly and Josie, and later on New York's Upper East Side with May – that Josie decides to become a Jew was quite without its desired effect. Rather, Josie provided the milk and honey for Roth's capacity for Jewish differentiation and American assimilation – she was, to his own admission, his teacher... his muse: *Bottom of the ninth, bases are loaded, the clean-up man is up to bat. He hits the ball deep into right field, and goes back to the warning track where she makes the catch over the wall.*

Josie unleashes in Roth a hatred against the primacy of the community, against its restrictions, against the guilt it imposes, against the ties that bind – those ties against which he struggled for so long to free himself from, and why? Just so he could strangle himself with the new rope binding him to Josie, who was really just a testing ground in the assertion of his newfound democratic-American-Jewish-manhood anyway? This is the launching pad for *The Facts*. The first cause for his interminable “enslavement to her sense of victimization:” The *why's* and the *where to's*...not the *who's* and the *what for's*. She inspires the rebellion “against the tribal” in his quest for the individual, for his own voice “against the stereotypical voice of the tribe or the tribe's stereotype of itself.” (172)

Despite the myth of the *artiste*, Josie did not provide Roth with the excitement he needed to write, though she was the energizer for his defiance; rather, she opened him up to what he needed to write about, which, although it spawned her, actually had little to do with her. While equally “embroiled with the buffeting world,” he was not compelled by the deprivations of *her* youth. Roth's were more subtle, contained by what *was* probably

a (more) civilized, well-managed home – albeit, Jewish. Like Roth’s community, Reb Shloyme’s would never quite be rid of those who needed, and not without reason, to cling to their pasts; to the customs that were unique and special, if at times backwards and unrelenting. And so we conclude with so many Jewish stories to tell, Jewish customs to preserve, hopeful that in every generation there will be at least one Roth or Abramovitsh, every bit as poignant – and no less prolific – suited for the job (and willing to take it on).