

Introduction

The man who decides to forge a distinct historical identity, who sets out to spring the historical lock, and who does so, brilliantly succeeds at altering his personal lot, only to be ensnared by the history he hadn't quite counted on: the history that isn't yet history, the history that the clock is now ticking off, the history proliferating as I write, accruing a minute at a time and grasped better by the future than it will ever be by us. The we that is inescapable: the present moment, the common lot, the current mood, the mind of one's country, the stranglehold of history that is one's own time. Blind-sided by the terrifyingly provisional nature of everything.

Philip Roth, *The Human Stain*

The East Coast is the deepest repository of American history, and the city of Newark, New Jersey, is embedded in the East Coast, next to New York City, close to Philadelphia, not far from Boston and Washington, DC. Colonial history has left its sediments in New Jersey, one of the original thirteen colonies. The American Revolution and early republic were intimately connected to the New Jersey territory between Philadelphia, city of the Constitutional Convention, and New York, which was briefly the new nation's capital. Newark worried its way through the War of 1812 and suffered through the Civil War. As the nation underwent the dramas of industrialization, mass immigration, and the black migration from South to North, so did Newark, an industrial city with few traces of its preindustrial past. In the late 1960s, Newark's name was added to the list of cities devastated by rioting and unrest, a small chapter in the chronicle of national discontent. On September 11, 2001, one of the four hijacked planes left from Newark airport, traveling out from New Jersey to wreak its world-historical havoc. Yet Newark is not an obviously historical place. It is too small to elicit the fascination of a major city. It is too poor to sponsor urban magnificence on par with "the hubbub across the Hudson," resplendent Manhattan, there to reduce all around it to diminutive and depressing proportions.¹ Even by

2 Introduction

the standards of America's postindustrial declining cities, its Clevelands and its Buffaloes, Newark is a sad place, with a meager skyline and a vast expanse of crumbling buildings, streets, and neighborhoods.

As observed from the train or the highway, Newark is entirely unwelcoming. From the outside looking in, its aura is sinister, and to those who must not stop—to live or do business there—it seems better to leave, to move south or north or west of this small metropolis without beauty and without history. If Manhattan is an archetypal destination and a place to stay (if you can), Newark is an archetypal place to leave and a city that bears visual evidence of mass departure. Its departed middle class fled in many directions, to outlying suburbs, to the Southwest, to retirement in Florida, fleeing to where the middle class is more safely and comfortably at home. Of those who stayed, many lived with the intent of leaving: circa 1974 some 28 percent of Newark's whites and 36 percent of the city's black residents "wished to move out of the city," Brad Tuttle writes.² A city shaped by immigration and migration was impermanent to begin with, a rest stop on the American highway—testament to a mobility that is not necessarily progress—though today's city is an inhabited ruin. Newark still exists. It still has hundreds of thousands of residents, and it still has a civic and political life, which is to say that it is still making history. Yet if Newark undergoes an urban renaissance, which it may, it will have escaped from its own despairing history and fled to some brighter future.³ It will have left its late twentieth-century self behind and joined its new self to more optimistic, future-oriented American energies. History can certainly be left behind. Not all history needs to be meticulously preserved, memorialized, and perpetuated. Not all history is material for historical epic.

Leslie Fiedler, a literary critic who grew up in Newark, analyzed the city's historical emptiness in a 1959 essay. His was an essay on *Goodbye, Columbus*, which a twenty-six-year-old Philip Roth published in 1959 and which prompted a flight of autobiographical reflection in Fiedler. Newark and the literary-historical sensibility are incompatible, Fiedler writes:

It was at once depressing to live in a place which we came slowly to realize did not exist at all for the imagination. That Newark was nowhere, no one of us could doubt, though it was all most of us knew.

What history the city possessed had been played out before our parents

or grandparents were a part of it, and we did not even trouble to tell ourselves that we disbelieved it.⁴

The parents and grandparents do not themselves have a history. They melt into the posthistorical industrial city, while their children grow into a historical abyss: “Even as kids we felt how undefined, even characterless our native place was. . . . We did not know its characterlessness, perhaps, but we lived it just as we lived its ugliness. Later we would *know*, when it was time.” The abyss of history mandates an abyss of literature, all of which amounts to civic emptiness. With Newark of the 1940s and 1950s in mind, Fiedler points out that “Newark had no writer, and hence no myth to outlive its unambitious public buildings, its mean frame houses.” Nor does *Goodbye, Columbus*, which Fiedler read with appreciative astonishment, bring the city to life. Roth’s novella signals the decline, perhaps even the death, of Newark: “Even as the legendary city which Roth creates is looked back to at its moment of dying, so is the love which is proper to it [at its moment of dying].”⁵

In its arc of decline, Newark is as good a setting as any for modern literature, which thrives on unfortunate places. Contemporary writers may be more at home in the slum than in the elegant suburb or gentrifying neighborhood. With its postindustrial gloom, Newark is a natural metaphor for difficulty, bad luck, and existential misery. It is exquisite backdrop for a brooding antihero. It could be the basis of political polemic in a literary medium: bare description of the city’s downtown is a form of social criticism and an invitation to muckraking. Charles Bukowsky could have lived well in Newark and written lovingly about it, mirroring the despair of a troubled protagonist in the image of a city so resolutely broken. It is unremarkable, then, that Philip Roth, who grew up in Newark and who writes fiction firmly grounded in sociological fact, would write about his hometown, choosing it again and again as the setting for his novels. That he would write novels steeped in Newark history and steeped in the notion (contra Fiedler) that Newark is a historical city par excellence—more a city in history than a metaphor for modern society or the deteriorating modern soul—is entirely remarkable. In three novels, sometimes called the American trilogy—*American Pastoral* (1997), *I Married a Communist* (1998), and *The Human Stain* (2000)—Roth has produced what might more accurately

4 Introduction

be called the Newark trilogy. Through these three novels Roth has approached Newark's history with maximum care. Newark is Roth's vehicle for exploring American character in conjunction with American history, the intersection of character and history on a national scale, running from the 1930s to the 1990s. The city of Newark and the raw details of its unspectacular history are anything but incidental to the novels' inner rhythms and central themes.⁶



The Newark trilogy does the unexpected. It re-creates the history of Newark on a grand scale, sometimes through direct narration and sometimes through the extended recollection of elderly characters, whose Newark stories are pieces in Roth's elaborate historical mosaic. It is a literary venture in urbanism that retraces the textured localism of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. In an essay on Saul Bellow, Roth emphasizes the parallel literary relationships between author and place: Chicago, "that tangible, engrossing American place that was his [Bellow's] to claim. . . . It's with comparable tentativeness or wariness that Faulkner (the other of America's two greatest twentieth-century novelist-realists) came to imaginative ownership of Lafayette County, Mississippi." His wariness overcome, Faulkner "found—as did Bellow after taking *his* first impromptu geographical steps—the location to engender those human struggles which, in turn, could fire up his intensity and provoke that impassioned response to a place and its history which at times propels Faulkner's sentences to the brink of unintelligibility and beyond."⁷ For Roth, what one novel begins, another continues, as if Newark were a map that can never be fully drawn. Within this literary triptych, Newark details form a canopy of American history, in which the local is the national. Few of Roth's readers can have firsthand knowledge of Newark's streets and neighborhoods, which only makes Roth's choice of setting more emphatic in its singularity.

The Newark trilogy is narrated by Nathan Zuckerman, an established figure in Roth's fiction and the literary Columbus of Newark, New Jersey. Zuckerman is a native son of Newark, though not a writer inevitably attached to his hometown. Seemingly rootless and cosmopolitan, Zuckerman is an alert novelist sensitive to the captivating story, and the stories that happen to captivate him are those that take him

back to Newark.⁸ Newark discovers him: Zuckerman returns, for example, to Newark for a high school reunion, meets a childhood acquaintance, hears the shocking story of another childhood acquaintance, and then he begins to write. The novel he writes—a novel within a novel, situated in the actual novel, *American Pastoral*—has the city of Newark as one of its protagonists, merging novel and city into one another. The city has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Its history, lovingly handled by Zuckerman/Roth, is alive with precise, dense, significant detail—visual detail, architectural detail, sociological detail, and “ethnic detail,” the details of race, ethnicity, and religion around which this American city coheres. Greil Marcus notes the “perfect, loving, furious detail” peculiar to the Newark trilogy.⁹ (Hermione Lee had observed “a charmed devotion to local [Newark] minutiae” in *Goodbye, Columbus*, Roth’s 1959 novella.)¹⁰ In *I Married a Communist*, Zuckerman returns to Newark, detailing a different family but the same territory, the same streets, the same milieu. In *The Human Stain*, Zuckerman lingers in New England for a deceptively long stretch of literary time, only to return yet again, not to the Jewish world of the previous two novels but to the world of an African American family living in East Orange, just outside Newark. Newark is the point from which all history radiates, the point of origin, the point to be escaped because it is the point of origin, and the point that marks the path from beginning to end, framing the enigma of the journey. History is what begins in New Jersey.

In the Newark trilogy, history is not a benevolent force. It is violent, vindictive, unforgiving, and very strong. These novels were published in the placid Clinton years. Yet Roth, in his literary-historical vision, did not try to capture his immediate present. He did not write from its mood. Or his mood was European, and more Eastern European than Western. Ross Posnock argues that the “antiutopian skepticism [of Vaclav Havel and Milan Kundera] helped inspire his [Roth’s] own rejection of American pastoralism in the conclusion of *The Counterlife* in 1986 and has oriented his major novels ever since.”¹¹ In the Newark trilogy, Roth wrote from Newark’s mood, which deviated from the benign national self-stereotype of the 1990s. Either the Clinton years as such failed to interest Roth, with the exception of the Monica Lewinsky scandal, or they failed to serve his literary purposes. The history that appealed to Roth was almost the opposite of local or national

history: it was twentieth-century history broadly construed, even if the Newark trilogy trades mostly in American facts. This “twentieth-century paradigm” could have imposed an even harsher vision upon Roth. With the Newark trilogy, it was not the strenuous wisdom of Primo Levi, Czeslaw Milosz, Aharon Appelfeld, Bruno Schultz, or Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn that Roth sought to transpose into American terms. Roth’s twentieth-century history stops short of gulag and Holocaust. Even *The Plot against America*, a post-Newark trilogy novel, stops short of gulag and Holocaust, although built upon the conceit of an America yielded up to anti-Semitic authoritarianism. Roth leaves Auschwitz and Siberia to historians and to other writers. Or he sees the Holocaust and related cataclysms as impossible to address in words and therefore in literature. He has described the Holocaust as “a crime to which there is no adequate response, no grief, no compassion, no vengeance that is sufficient.”¹² If true, then writers eager to capture the twentieth century in their literature face certain inherent limitations.

Whatever these limitations are, the Newark trilogy outlines a thesis derived from twentieth-century European history. We are less the authors of history than history—in its Tolstoyan waves of chaos—is the author of our fate, the capricious master of our destiny, able to destroy and scatter and disperse, to cause suffering when it wishes and to leave injustice as mere injustice, unredeemed. *American Pastoral* evokes Milton and the Old Testament God, human destiny bound to chaos, to Jehovah’s wrath. *I Married a Communist* evokes the Shakespearean intimacy with historical upheaval and human mayhem. *The Human Stain* evokes Greek tragedy and the gods of Greek mythology, willing to upend human order for their own purposes and pleasure. Regardless of our literary taste and our philosophy of history, we are all in history’s grip, “the stranglehold of history that is one’s own time,” a stranglehold that can easily be murderous. History’s grip can also be subtle and brutally generous, bestowing illusions of stability and permanence on those who wish to believe in them. In *I Married a Communist*, two young people, Ramón Noguera and his fiancée, Rosalind, imbue a New York dinner party with the joy of their upcoming marriage. It is 1949 and they plan to live in Cuba. “The Noguerras were tobacco growers,” the narrative voice of Nathan Zuckerman informs us, “Ramón’s father having inherited from Ramón’s grandfather thousands of farm acres in a

region called the Partido, land that would be inherited by Ramón, and in time by the children of Ramón and Rosalind.”¹³ Generational entitlement rolls calmly toward a disruption that will come, as narrator and reader know, when Batista’s Cuba is replaced by Castro’s Cuba. Yet even the narrative voice is convinced by the self-assurance of the young couple, warmly cradled in history’s good graces, planning for the future according to the logic of 1949. The narrative voice implies the naturalness of their optimism, of their unspoken faith in history’s smooth machinery and benevolence toward the ruling class.

In America, illusions of stability and permanence, wrested from the historical whirlwind, can be especially enticing. America can cast “the spell of the dream of the unhaunted life,” in a phrase from *Operation Shylock* (1993).¹⁴ The American twentieth century was not the same as the twentieth century in Europe and Russia, the battlefields of world war and its countless atrocities as well as the domain of Roth’s ancestry and (non-American) literary purview. Even a unified, prosperous, democratic Berlin—to take one of many European examples—cannot hide the fact of its division and, behind this fact, the reality that Berlin was the city in which multiple tyrannies collided. In America, historically induced trauma was less spectacular, not something to divide and conquer the capital city. Twentieth-century American trauma played itself out on local and international planes, in Little Rock, Arkansas, and in Vietnam. Because of America’s atypical political continuity, because no wars were fought on American soil in the twentieth century, many Americans can pretend that history is charitable or simply absent. Or they can pretend that history is theirs to manipulate, since it is powerless to manipulate them. Roth is fascinated by this American possibility. Although there is much hard evidence for the American conviction that identity is plastic, a manipulable identity leads to the fallacy that history, too, is plastic. If one can become someone else, surely one can throw off unwanted history: the two actions are equivalent. Jay Gatz struggles to become Jay Gatsby; he succeeds in becoming Gatsby; the America of the 1920s offers good camouflage for such chameleons; and the Great Gatsby is not thwarted by history; he is thwarted by human smallness and snobbishness, including his own smallness and snobbishness. F. Scott Fitzgerald did not align history and individual destiny in *The Great Gatsby*, attuned as he was to the movement of both. Roth,

who is more inclined to make this alignment, marvels at the space between history and destiny in the American imagination. In the Newark trilogy, the American imagination is embodied in particular characters and especially in the novels' three heroes: Seymour "the Swede" Levov, Ira Ringold, and Coleman Silk. Each believes that history can be rearranged, and, on American soil, each conducts an experiment in the invisibility of history: visible man, invisible history.

In the Newark trilogy, history and the city of Newark are interchangeable. Thus, the will to rearrange history is associated with the desire to leave Newark, almost as if, by leaving, one were emigrating from the Old World of Newark to the New World of another America, not completing but perpetuating the epic journey of immigrant grandparents. Each of the three heroes leaves Newark and is defined by the terms of his departure: their collective self-invention is made possible by leaving Newark. The Swede is so called because he looks Scandinavian, although he is Jewish. He leaves Newark for an affluent rural area of New Jersey, where he can sincerely be the Swede and where he must not be Newark's Seymour Levov. Ira Ringold makes his way to Manhattan, where he works in radio and does Abraham Lincoln impersonations, a small-scale celebrity and a communist (in private), no less a masked man in splendid isolation from Newark than the Swede. Coleman Silk manages the greatest disappearing act of all. Born into a black family living outside Newark, he leaves behind everything, exploiting the magic of American culture, the presumed lightness or plasticity of American history, and emerges a white (Jewish) professor of classics at a New England college. Long before history starts to enact its revenge on these defectors from it, Roth is suggesting the folly of their ways. The folly of leaving has a certain grandeur to it, as in the greatness of the *Great Gatsby*, whose folly is Fitzgerald's subject. Roth's three heroes leave because Newark is the place of cardinal things, the place of fathers and mothers, of childhood and family background, the place that gives meaning to labels and imposes them upon those who might resist being labeled. The heaviness of Newark's presence in these novels, the weight of urban detail woven into the narrative, the unavoidability of its many-layered past, is itself a statement about history. Cardinal things cannot be ignored or easily rearranged, and there is no recipe for extracting lightness from heaviness.