

PHILIP ROTH'S POSTMODERN AMERICAN ROMANCE

CRITICAL ESSAYS
ON SELECTED WORKS

Jane Statlander

FOREWORD BY
Derek Parker Royal

☆ TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN JEWISH WRITERS ☆

PETER LANG

The central thesis of this book is that Philip Roth's work is most accurately viewed as postmodernist American Historical Romance, rather than marginalized as Jewish-American. Four works are analyzed in relation to this thesis and to the specific idea that Roth's contribution is entirely within mainstream American literature and culture. Emphasizing the importance and influence of Hebrew Scripture, the author demonstrates that, paradoxically, Roth's Jewishness locates him squarely within the canon of (a Hebraic) America and its letters.

Jane Statlander received her Ph.D. in American literature and culture from the University of New England in New South Wales, Australia. She is currently Professor of English at Miami International University of Art and Design.

PHILIP ROTH'S
POSTMODERN
AMERICAN ROMANCE

Twentieth-Century American Jewish Writers

Daniel Walden
General Editor

Vol. 15



PETER LANG

New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • Bern
Frankfurt • Berlin • Brussels • Vienna • Oxford

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Statlander, Jane.

Philip Roth's postmodern American romance:
critical essays on selected works / Jane Statlander.

p. cm. — (Twentieth-century American Jewish writers; v. 15)

Includes bibliographical references.

1. Roth, Philip—Criticism and interpretation. 2. American fiction—Jewish authors—
History and criticism. 3. Postmodernism (Literature)—United States. I. Title.

PS3568.O855Z9 813'.54—dc22 2010041801

ISBN 978-1-4539-0056-7

ISSN 0897-7844

Bibliographic information published by **Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**.

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the "Deutsche
Nationalbibliografie"; detailed bibliographic data is available
on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de/>.

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability
of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity
of the Council of Library Resources.



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29 Broadway, 18th floor, New York, NY 10006
www.peterlang.com

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Printed in Germany

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Foreword; Or, A Fine Romance

Over the past ten years, there has been a flowering of Philip Roth scholarship, a proliferation of criticism that seems to be growing exponentially with each passing year. Since the beginning of the new millennium—a temporal marker so vividly, and tragically, dramatized in the low-key masterpiece, *The Dying Animal* (2001)—there have been 19 book-length studies devoted to Roth (both monographs and edited collections), over 96 book chapters, more than 180 journal articles, two special journal issues, and approximately 30 dissertations that devote a substantive portion to Roth's fiction. Put another way, the sheer volume of Roth scholarship since 2000 closely rivals the total produced over the preceding four decades. What is more, 2002 saw the founding of the Philip Roth Society, an international community of researchers and readers devoted to the study of Roth's writing, and three years later came its scholarly organ, *Philip Roth Studies*. This, along with Roth's array of literary awards (as of this date, lacking only the Nobel Prize in Literature) and the enshrinement of his output in Library of America editions, has helped to secure his place as perhaps the most significant living writer in the United States today.

Given all of this attention, it has become commonplace to frame Roth within the larger American literary landscape, to contextualize his fiction and its significance by reading it within the company of others. More times than not, he has been described as a Jewish American writer, a compatriot of such authors as Bernard Malamud and Saul Bellow, a grouping the latter has derisively described as "the Hart, Schaffner, and Marx of American literature." But such an association has its limitations. The subject matter of Roth's fiction touches upon Jewish issues in a number of ways, but is it appropriate to call Roth a "Jewish writer" in the same way that Chaim Potok (given his engagement with orthodoxy) or Cynthia Ozick (and her emphasis on covenant) are described as such? Roth himself bristles at this designation. He made this point emphatically in his 2002 speech accepting the National Book Foundation's Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. Saying that he has never in his life considered himself a Jewish writer, he asked his listeners if they would consider Theodore Dreiser or

Ernest Hemingway to be Christian American writers. Yet while Roth has continued to dismiss this ethnic label, critics nonetheless persist in reading him primarily within the Jewish American literary tradition.

On the other hand, there are many who privilege the later period of Roth's creative output and see him as more reminiscent of such broad-stroke, epic writers as John Dos Passos and William Carlos Williams. The focus of much, if not most, recent scholarship has been on Roth's novels since the late 1990s, specifically his overtly historically-conscious novels *American Pastoral* (1997), *I Married a Communist* (1998), *The Human Stain* (2000), and *The Plot Against America* (2004). Indeed, many have seen Roth as a chronicler of modern America, shedding his narrative light on the dreams, ambitions, hypocrisies, and betrayals that have come to define our post-World War II culture. In this way, Roth is often read within the realist tradition, an inheritor of the national mimetic impulse found in such authors as Mark Twain and Henry James. At the same time, and given his mischievous postmodern turns, there are those who frame Roth within the context of some of our great literary iconoclasts and troublemakers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, and William Faulkner. One has only to flip through the pages of *The Great American Novel* (1973) or *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (1993) to see some of the permutations of this strain.

Yet, while some critics have unearthed certain Melvillian tendencies in Roth's fiction, few have noticed—curiously enough—the American romance echoes of such early writers as Charles Brockden Brown, Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Edgar Allan Poe. This is what Jane Statlander has taken as her domain. In her study, *Philip Roth's Postmodern American Romance*, she explores the ways in which Roth participates in one of our earliest, and arguably our best defining, modes of narrative. Focusing on selected texts such as the novels *The Counterlife* (1986) and *Exit Ghost* (2007), as well as his early stories "The Day It Snowed" (1954) and "The Conversion of the Jews" (1958), Statlander argues that much of Roth's work can be read in the American romance tradition. With its unsteady psychological terrain, its ambiguous subject positions, its contorted self-reflexivity, and its intermixing of fact and fiction, these narratives resist strict mimetic (or traditional "novelistic") interpretations and instead bear a striking resemblance to what Hawthorne famously described as the "neutral territory" of the familiar, "somewhere between the real world

and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other.”

In mapping out the contours of Roth’s romances, Statlander takes as her point of departure the foundational works of F. O. Matthieson, Richard Chase, Michael Davitt Bell, and G. R. Thompson, explores both the Puritan and Hebraic roots of American romance, and teases out the affinities between early American writing and what we have come to define as postmodernism. Herein lies the promise of Statlander’s thesis: while she approaches Roth as a postmodern writer—a more or less common appraisal of Roth—she goes on to triangulate her analysis by placing that postmodern reading within the romance tradition, something that few readers have noted. In doing so, she not only provides us with a new way of reading Roth’s fiction, but she also invites us, perhaps unknowingly, to look anew at other postmodern authors such as John Barth, Robert Coover, Paul Auster, and Don DeLillo, and to see in their fiction the traces of American romance.

Making the case for his chosen genre, Hawthorne wrote in his Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* that the romancer must “claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material” and “manage his atmospherical medium as to bring out or mellow the lights, and deepen and enrich the shadows, of the picture.” In the pages that follow, Jane Statlander highlights the “atmospherical” grounds of Roth’s fiction and reveals those dimly lit passages, those shadow-hued frames, where the real is infused with imagination and the probable supplanted by the possible. This is a different reading of Philip Roth, and one to which we should well attend.

Derek Parker Royal has published extensively on Philip Roth, including his 2004 book, *Philip Roth: New Perspectives on an American Author*. He is the founder of the Philip Roth Society as well as the founder, and current executive editor, of the journal *Philip Roth Studies*. He is currently completing his book manuscript, *More Than Jewish Mischief: Narrating Subjectivity in Philip Roth’s Later Fiction*.